Risk in the VET Practitioner’s Teaching Experience and Professional Identity

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Acknowledgements

My first acknowledgement must go to the VET practitioners who gave so generously of their time and were willing to share their experiences, struggles and joys with me. They provided moments of challenge and insight throughout this project that have been instrumental in the development of this research. I have felt extremely privileged to experience their trust during our many moments together.

Professor Karen Starr has my sincere thanks for her guidance throughout our association. The questions, challenges and support for this research has kept me focused when the demands of life and work have threatened to overwhelm my progress. I have benefited immeasurably from her rigorousness, expertise and encouragement.

There are many friends who have encouraged and supported my research and tolerated my frequent absences. Their interest and support has been very much appreciated as has their willingness to fit into my recalcitrant schedule.

I am particularly indebted to my dad who has been a great encourager and supporter throughout this and previous academic pursuits. I am also extremely grateful to every member of my family for the support and encouragement they have provided during each stage of this research.
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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANTA</td>
<td>Australian National Training Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQF</td>
<td>Australian Qualifications Framework</td>
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<td>ASQA</td>
<td>Australian Skills Quality Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQTF</td>
<td>Australian Quality Training Framework</td>
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<td>AEU</td>
<td>Australian Education Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>AWPA</td>
<td>Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBT</td>
<td>Competency Based Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COAG</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEECD</td>
<td>Department of Education and Early Childhood Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEEWR</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEST</td>
<td>Department of Education Science and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELICOS</td>
<td>English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HESG</td>
<td>Higher Education and Skills Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRSCEE</td>
<td>House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communications Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISC</td>
<td>Industry Skills Councils</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISCAC</td>
<td>Industry Skills Councils Advisory Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCEETYA</td>
<td>Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs</td>
</tr>
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<td>MCVTE</td>
<td>Ministerial Council for Vocational and Training Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MINCO</td>
<td>Ministerial Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCVER</td>
<td>National Centre for Vocational Education Research</td>
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<td>NSF</td>
<td>National Skills Framework</td>
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NSSC  National Skills Standards Council
NQC  National Quality Council
PLS  Plain Language Statement
RPL  Recognition of Prior Learning
RTO  Registered Training Organisation
SCOTESE  Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment
SCIOIS  Standing Council on Industry Skills
SES  Socio Economic Status
TAFE  Technical and Further Education
TEQSA  Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
TP  Training Package
VET  Vocational Education and Training
VQRA  Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority
Abstract

The past few decades have brought significant change to the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector in Australia. The impact of policy changes at state and federal government levels has created challenges for dual sector universities comprising Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and higher education divisions. In addition, global competition, marketisation and the deregulation of the tertiary education sector have opened up opportunities for exponential growth in the provision of VET by private providers that has destabilised the operation of TAFE (Marginson, 1997, 2011; Brown, 2011). These changes have been catalysts for VET practitioners to question the community obligations traditionally implicit in the operation of TAFE institutions (DEECD, 2013). Consequently the growing ‘risk’ (Beck, 1992, 1999, 2000b, 2009a; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) to individual VET practitioners has become apparent as these changes cascade through educational structures.

This thesis uses grounded theory to explore the responses of dual sector VET practitioners to the impact of risk (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Birks & Mills, 2011; Chamaz, 2006). Engaging Beck’s (Beck, 1992, 1999, 2000b) lens of risk, it explores the symbiotic interplay between VET practitioners’ everyday experience and their commitment to TAFE’s community obligations. Twelve VET practitioners from a dual sector TAFE participated in semi-structured interviews. They were recruited from across TAFE course areas to ensure a broad range of views and experiences were examined.
Key themes emerged from the research relating to the unique opportunity VET practitioners believe they have to influence the lives of students. These strong social justice values expressed by practitioners were juxtaposed against mechanisms of risk management such as compliance systems and audit practices. Becks’ (1992, 1996) observation that reflexive modernisation fosters ‘distrust’ in the role of the expert emerged as practitioners demonstrated a lack of trust in compliance systems and auditors. Within this theme it was evident that VET practitioners found themselves managing compliance requirements in ways designed to avoid blame or causing further risk to themselves, their colleagues and students.

Complexity and ambiguity emerged as concerns for practitioners as they responded to changing student relationships and ambiguity within their professional identity. Policy changes to manage funding cuts and increased compliance and administration converged at the level of the individual practitioner. The result for practitioners manifested in a personal cost for ‘teaching in TAFE’ through increasing workload, unpaid overtime and stress, all of which spilled over into their personal lives (Dempsey, 2013, AUE, 2012).

This thesis presents an understanding of the experiences of VET practitioners through the lens of risk. Simultaneously, it exposes the negative impacts of risk on VET practitioners’ experience while opening up a positive space within which to respond through reflexive practice. Implications of this research include: an urgent need for VET practitioners, educational institutions and governments to address the negative impacts of risk on VET practitioners; and, practical support
for the community obligations inherent in the role of VET practitioners within TAFE.
Preface

This PhD research project is the result of questioning the connections between the way ‘risk’ is managed in the VET sector through compliance systems, and the resultant effects this has on VET practitioners’ professional identity. The term VET practitioner, which emphasises the notion of ongoing development and ‘practice’ of teaching and training capabilities, is used throughout this research as the majority of participants used this term to define themselves (see discussion in chapter seven).

The research investigates my initial observations that compliance systems appeared to be the formative and dominant features of the VET environment in Australia for VET practitioners. These systems seemed to dominate the day-to-day experience of VET practitioners, most predominantly through the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), national compliance and quality auditing standards for learning and assessment strategies and practices.

My introduction to the rigors of compliance began over seven years ago when a change of career brought me into the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector at ‘the organisation’¹, a dual sector (TAFE)/higher education institution. In common with all workplaces, the organisation’s teaching staff had specific survival mantras about the institution, the manager, the staff and the facilities, frustration with bureaucratic systems and the perceived and real pressures and demands on their time. The organisation was no different in this regard; in my initial interactions with many of the TAFE teaching staff I was surprised by

¹ ‘The organisation’ is a term used to protect the identity of the institution and participants involved in this study.
comments such as, ‘I used to be a teacher but I am an administrative assistant now’; or, ‘teach! I spend so much time and energy managing potential risks, and proving I am qualified and competent to teach, I have no time to *really* teach.’ Such verbalised discontentment, I realised, was representative of widespread negative sentiments, and frequently the source of ironic ‘insider’ jokes against the institution.

The rhetoric from VET practitioners within the organisation conflicted with the message from the broader VET context, promoting as it did an idealised model of the ‘New VET Professional’ (Mitchell, 2008a; Mitchell & Ward, 2010). These messages appeared incongruous to me as a newcomer. Many professional development activities, and the prevailing discourse within the organisation, were designed to develop the ‘New VET Professional’ through higher-level skills development, enabling all practitioners to navigate the rigors and complexities of operating simultaneously in the public and commercial sectors. However, this idealised view failed to address, or make visible, the tensions VET practitioners expressed between teaching practices and the impost of risk-avoiding compliance systems. The disconnection between these discourses became the catalyst for further investigation and ultimately this research project.

Central to this investigation were the questions, ‘What is risk?’ ‘How is risk reflected in VET compliance systems?’ ‘Do these compliance systems and practices impact on VET practitioners’ everyday experience and the way they construct their professional identity?’ ‘In what ways are VET practitioners empowered to either resist or accept compliance practices?’ While these
questions are located in my own particular experience of TAFE in the VET sector, the conceptual lens of critique that I have applied to these questions comes from my background in the social sciences. Applying a critical social science perspective to this research opened up a space to engage with the structures and discourses of power that underpin the hegemony of managing risk through compliance systems. It provided a perspective from which to articulate the hidden questions of ‘whose interests are served?’ and ‘whose voice is being heard?’ and to foreground these within this research.
CHAPTER ONE: Scoping the context of VET

Introduction

This research addresses gaps in theorising and the educational discourse on risk. It investigates these gaps in knowledge as they apply to TAFE through VET policies and practices and specifically their subsequent impact on VET practitioners’ experience. The macro context of ‘risk,’ posited by sociologist Ulrich Beck contends that we are living in a significantly different period of history in which a process of reflexive modernisation is taking place that is dissolving industrial society’s traditional boundaries (Beck, 1992; Hope, 2005). A component of Beck’s ‘risk society’ thesis is the individuation of risk that has produced changes in society. The extent to which these changes may be evident in TAFE in the VET sector, and the impact they have on VET practitioner’s experience, are the focus for this research.

A perusal of the literature indicates that there has been scant discussion of the nature of this risk regime or the impact of managing the complexity of risk through compliance systems, in the VET sector (Black & Reich, 2010). To understand the nature of the environment in which the participants in this research work it is necessary to comprehend the complexity of the sector and its development. To ask questions, such as, ‘How does risk manifest within the VET practitioners professional experience? What connections can be drawn from the ways in which the VET system has developed?’
While the substantive work of this thesis is contained in the following chapters a brief overview of VET comprises the rest of this chapter. Consequently, the following information is intended to inform the reader who is unfamiliar with VET, as well as to outline the research specific context and themes for those who have an existing knowledge of the VET environment.

**VET context**

Readers familiar with the Australian VET sector will be aware that it is a particular form of education designed to develop and/or enhance skills and knowledge within a vocational area with an emphasis on work ready applications. The sector operates within a Competency-Based Training (CBT) framework that has its own discourse, culture, and practices that are often difficult for those outside the sector to negotiate (Wheelahan, Arkoudis, Moodie, Fredman, & Bexley, 2012). Situating this research within the TAFE division of a specific dual sector (TAFE/University) organisation further narrows the focus of this project to enable a targeted, in depth investigation rather than a broad sweep of the sector. More specifically, the context for this research has been the ways in which a dual sector TAFE manages risk through compliance systems and practices.

Therefore, this discussion of the VET environment is not intended to be an extensive historical account of all the changes in the VET or TAFE landscape, rather it functions as a foundation for the issues that are significant and relevant to this thesis. The sector has developed from very particular beginnings and operates from competency-based compliance models that are specific to its focus on skills
and training. Managing risk and developing appropriate professional practice are informed by the history of TAFE and its part in the VET system.

**One nation: One training system**

Historically the VET sector traces its beginnings through the history of state and territory based technical and trade education (Murray-Smith, 1956; Rushbrook, 2004). These post-secondary forms of education, particularly apprenticed forms of learning, have been integral in the development of Australia’s formal system of education (DEEWR, 2008). Vocational education and training commenced in the nineteenth century, when institutions offered industry training and skills development in predominantly traditional male trades, such as mechanics and mining (Murray-Smith, 1956). Vocational education and training focused on mostly men working full-time in a narrow band of trade-related industries for almost 100 years reported Murray-Smith (1956).

An exponential increase in the sector occurred during and after the Second World War when ‘more than 300,000 people’ went through two training schemes (Dymock & Billett, 2010, p. 469). These two training schemes were the Commonwealth and Technical Training Scheme and the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme. The schemes helped mobilise skilled workers for military service and also served to assist those who had been demobilised to re-join the workforce with a needed skill. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, traditional manufacturing, mining and agricultural industries started to decline in economic significance as new developments in the fields of the communications and the finance industries emerged. With the gains of second wave feminism
women also entered the workforce in increasing numbers, changing the nature and requirements of the workforce (Burns, 2002).

Industry workforce requirements dictated the nature and scope of training that was subsequently funded and administered by state education bodies (DEEWR, 2010). Less publicly visible, though significant have been the plethora of workplace training programs, business colleges and development courses that have been conducted and managed within industry and business organisations. However, the development over the last few decades of TAFE and the VET sector within a formal framework and recognisable entity for vocational and skills based training is the result of a coalescence of these long standing training arrangements and traditions (Aulich, 1991; Harris & Hodge, 2009; Mitchell & Young, 2001).

The nationally unified VET sector training system developed as a progressive attempt to contain the impact of economic risk, as it is understood in terms of structural employment and workforce requirements (Dymock & Billett, 2010; AWPA, 2013). Skills shortages and the risk they represented to the Australian economy were addressed in three education and training focused reports delivered in the 1990s: the Finn (1991), Mayer (1992) and Carmichael (1992) reports. The implementation of recommendations from these reports accelerated a process of skills reform that has evolved into the National VET sector, as it exists today (DEEWR, 2008).

Australia’s overarching, coordinating national body for the VET system formally commenced in 1994 with the initial establishment of the Australian National
Training Authority (ANTA). Prior to this, Australia had eight separate training systems all operating within state and territory jurisdictions that resulted in qualifications having no guaranteed recognition or consistency between these jurisdictions. The establishment of ANTA heralded a significant change in the way post-compulsory education was managed in Australia (DEEWR, 2008). On 1 July 2005 the responsibilities and functions of the Australian National Training Authority were transferred to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, previously the Department of Education, Science and Training). At the time of completing this research the responsibility resides with the Department of Education and Training (DET), following an announcement by the Prime Minister in December 2014 that the Australian Government Department of Education and Training had been formed. The department has taken responsibility for national policies and programs including early childhood education, school education, higher education, vocational education and training, international education and research (DET, 2014a).

**One training system: One governance structure**

The governance arrangements for the VET sector are complex, multi-layered, influenced by education and economic development and constantly changing, which in part reflects the federated nature of Australian jurisdictional responsibilities. A ministerial council (MINCO), under the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), has responsibility for oversight of the strategic policy direction of the sector and funding arrangements for the states and territories (Smith, 1999; COAG, 2015). A complex history of federal and state agreements, statutory authorities and legislation underpins the development of the sector’s
funding and governance arrangements. Therefore, it is not possible to detail all of these arrangements within the confines of this study. However, the *Australian National Training Authority Act 1992* (Cth) was a significant development in formalising the responsibility and accountability structures for the sector. Legislation was enacted simultaneously at both state/territory and federal levels to effectively nationalise the training system.

Changes agreed in 2009 by the Rudd Government and states/territories to rationalise the 90 existing COAG payments into 5 areas precipitated the funding and legislative outcomes in the *National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development* (COAG, 2009). This agreement specified a series of outcomes facilitating specific purpose payments (COAG arrangement) under the *Federal Financial Relations Act 2009* (Cth).

As a result of the COAG decision on 30 April 2009, Ministers agreed to a realignment of roles and responsibilities for the (MINCO), Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) and the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education (MCVTE). The outcome was the formation of the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) that commenced from 1 July 2009. The realignment was promoted as a strategy to include a broader, cross-sectoral role in education and skills development for the council (DEEWR, 2010b). It was a strategy designed to manage the ongoing ‘complexity of the VET governance systems’ in Australia (Cully et al., 2009, p. 9). While this complexity is acknowledged at ministerial level, VET practitioners engage in the day-today consequences of a system that is
multilayered. The intention of this research is to draw connections between the complexities of a TAFE institution operating in a dual sector environment, and the impact on practitioners.

In 2011, the Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTese) was formed. The current COAG ministerial Standing Council on Industry and Skills (SCOIS) superseded SCOTese in December 2013 (HRSCEE, 2014). When MCTEE was formed in 2009 it established an overarching policy direction for the VET sector through the collaboration of state and territory ministers responsible for VET in their jurisdictions. The National Quality Council (NQC) as a Committee of MCTEE oversaw quality assurance to ensure consistency in the application of the AQTF standards for the audit and registration of training providers. The NQC was responsible for the endorsement of Training Packages (TP) along with other issues relating to quality assurance under the National Skills Framework (NSF). The now disbanded council brought together key stakeholders in the VET sector such as, industry, unions, practitioners and governments to monitor and support quality (NQC, 2010).

Also providing advice to the then Minister of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations was Skills Australia, an independent statutory body formed after the enactment of the Skills Australia Act 2008 (Cth). This industry and skills based advisory body provided direct advice in relation to skills requirements. Supporting Skills Australia were 11 industry skills councils that provided advice about the skills and training needs of their specific industries (ISC, 2010). In 2015 the Industry Skills Councils Advisory Committee (ISCAC) superseded
Skills Australia (AWPA, 2015; ISC, 2015). Industry areas are currently represented through their industry skills council, and their recommendations and agenda influence the course constructions that VET practitioners use for their training delivery and assessment strategies.

There have been many changes in the VET sector attempting to consolidate a unified and centrally administered system by successive governments. The current VET Reform Taskforce, established by the Australian Government in 2013, continued the process of change with its review into ways to boost the nation’s productivity and increase international competitiveness. Ministers agreed on six objectives for reform of the VET system (ASQA, 2015c):

1. A national VET system which is governed effectively with clear roles and responsibilities for industry, the Commonwealth and the states and territories.

2. A national system of streamlined industry-defined qualifications that is able to respond flexibly to major national and state priorities and emerging areas of skills need.

3. Trade apprenticeships that are appropriately valued and utilised as a career pathway.

4. A modern and responsive national regulatory system that applies a risk-management approach and supports a competitive and well-functioning market.

5. Informed consumers who have access to the information they need to make choices about providers and training that meets their needs.
6. Targeted and efficient government funding that considers inconsistencies between jurisdictions or disruption to the fee-for-service market.

Changes in 2014 and 2015 have continued to further consolidate VET, and that is currently the responsibility of the newly formed Australian Government Department of Education and Training.

**A consistent quality system**

The national training system developed three key elements, which aim to promote quality and national consistency in terms of qualifications and the delivery and assessment of training. These elements are Training Packages, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the Australian Quality Training Framework. Collectively they were referred to as the National Skills Framework (DEEWR, 2010a, 2010b). A comprehensive description of the details of the quality system is an extensive task not possible in these limited pages. Nonetheless, key functions of the quality structure are informative in understanding the way that risk is managed through compliance systems and therefore has relevance to this thesis.

The AQF provides the national policy for qualifications incorporating qualifications from each educational sector into a single, comprehensive national qualifications framework (AQF, 2015). The AQTF is the national set of quality standards that assure nationally consistent, high quality training and assessment within the vocational education and training system (AQTF, 2015). Training
packages are a set of skills performance standards that include competency units, qualifications and assessment guidelines that are developed with industry consultation. Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) has a regulatory function and monitors training providers to ensure they met the training standards (ASQA, 2015b). These frameworks in turn underpin the operation of the regulatory system in Victoria where regulatory operations are consistent with the national system; although they operate independently through the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VQRA). VQRA as the state regulatory body for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) is tasked with ensuring that the national standards are met in Victoria through a memorandum of understanding with the regulator ASQA (VRQA, 2015).

RTOs form the organisational unit for the delivery of nationally accredited courses and qualifications. An RTO is a registered training entity that may be operated by private providers, corporate bodies, community organisations, schools, higher education institutions, industry bodies and other organisations. TAFE is an RTO that provides public programs. They are all required to meet the AQTF registration requirements and are currently regulated by ASQA (ASQA, 2015a, 2015b). In recent years the quality of VET has been called into question with repeated cases of RTOs not meeting quality standards, students obtaining qualifications without demonstrating the commensurate skill levels, students not receiving the training they may have paid exorbitant amounts for and a range of fraudulent behaviours (ASQA, 2014). So significant has this behaviour become that amendments to the National Vocational and Education Training Regulator
The amendments strengthened the role of the regulator to (DET, 2015b):

- enable the Australian Government to make new standards that address emerging issues which impact on the quality and integrity of training for individuals and students;
- require anyone marketing a VET course, including brokers and other third parties, to clearly identify which registered training organisation (RTO) is providing the qualification; and,
- extend the registration period for RTOs from five to seven years so the national training regulator –ASQA – can focus its attention on investigating and acting upon high risk, poor quality providers.

The issues of substandard training quality and unethical behaviour by RTOs highlight the complexity of risk that VET practitioners negotiate.

**The development of the AQTF**

While many VET practitioners may have an understanding of VET governance structures it is the compliance requirements generated through the AQTF that impacts most tangibly on their day-to-day work experience (Black & Reich, 2010). In February 2006, COAG asked the previous MINCO, MCVTE to review and amend the AQTF. The requirements of AQTF 2007 resulted from this review and came into effect 1 July 2007 (DEEWR, 2010b). Its key features were:

- **Outcomes focused**—focus on the quality of services and outcomes being achieved, such as completion rates, rather than the inputs used to get there.
• **Nationally consistent**—state and territory registering bodies are required to work together to develop and publish national guidelines to ensure a consistent interpretation and implementation of AQTF 2007.

• **Streamlined**—the standards for RTOs have been simplified and streamlined to focus on outcomes.

• **Transparent**—national guidelines and handbooks are readily accessible.

In December 2009, COAG endorsed further amendments to the AQTF to strengthen regulatory requirements underpinning the VET sector. The amendments introduced strengthened conditions and standards relating to providers, both initial registration of new training providers entering the market and continuing registration of ongoing providers. Quality standards emphasise financial governance, student fee protection and, most significantly for VET practitioners, audit requirements. In June 2010, MCTEE agreed to a further round of COAG endorsed AQTF essential conditions and standards for RTO registration. The new AQTF essential conditions and standards for initial registration and continuing registration came into effect from 1 July 2010 (DEEWR, 2010b, ASQA, 2011, 2015a). Regulatory bodies have led changes in vocational education through amendments to the AQTF, AQF, training packages setting standards for regulating outcomes and compliance measures that impact all providers across the VET sector.
It should be noted that changes in the last few years have allowed TAFE institutions to deliver some higher education programs, which means that dual sector institutions must also meet the standards required by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). This agency was established by the Australian Government in July 2009 following the review of higher education by Professor Denise Bradley (The Bradley Report). An initial recommendation from the report was to combine the regulatory arrangements for higher education and VET into a single agency over time (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). However, successive governments have continued with separate arrangements for VET and higher education (TEQSA, 2015).

In January 2015, a further strengthening of VET regulatory standards occurred under the Standards for Registered Training Organisations (2015) (ASQA, 2015a). A range of changes have been enacted to improve quality by requiring that training delivery is commensurate with the units taught and that VET practitioners are appropriately qualified and the units of competence meet industry need more specifically. The governance and financial requirements for RTOs have also been tightened with a ‘fit and proper person test’ and transparent management of student fees (ASQA, 2015a).

Risk management and responsibility, under these arrangements, is devolved through AQTF standards to individual VET practitioners, resulting in requirements for ‘proof’ of compliance. ‘Proof’ includes demonstration of quality through teaching and learning strategies, assessment and Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) assessment documents, assessment maps, registration audits and
reporting procedures that validate competence and the adequacy of learning and assessment strategies. The VET practitioner is also required to maintain currency and competence in their area of expertise and in teaching and learning (Smith, Brennan-Kemmis, Grace & Payne, 2009; ASQA, 2015a). The impact of managing this exposure to risk, with its reliance on professional judgement, provides a focus for the examination of risk impact in VET practitioner’s professional experience and identity.

The regulation and consistency of qualifications have also been subsumed into a nationalised quality framework, the AQF (AQF, 2015). This framework provides a comprehensive and nationally consistent matrix for post-compulsory education. The framework was introduced Australia-wide on 1 January 1995. Conflict within this arrangement focuses on the ‘breadth’ of national qualifications as a system of delivering an industry wide approach (Cully et al., 2009). In practice the centralised nature of power dynamics in a nationally funded and administered scheme is reflected in broad course constructions that may not be adequate for specific industry needs (ASQA, 2015c). There are risks and complexity that VET practitioners manage in achieving the requirements for broad based skills, and the highly specialised and narrowly focused needs of some industry courses. Inevitably practitioners must manage the frequent changes required by industry in training packages (Cully et al., 2009). Critics of such frequent change cite ‘top down’ pressure from organisations such as the former Industry Skills Council of Australia, and their narrow industry agenda and focus (Cully et al., 2009).
VET reform processes in 2015 will continue to engage industry closely with policy development in VET through the newly formed ISCAC (DET, 2015c). A recent Australian Government response to industry is the announcement of funding for a ‘$476 million Industry Skills Fund’ to support business innovation and to deliver ‘200,000 targeted training places’ (DET, 2014b). The allocation and administration of funding involves the states and their regulatory bodies.

**VET in Victoria**

While funding is federally allocated it is administered through the states'/territories’ statutory bodies within the national frameworks and standards. The organisation, the focus in this thesis, is located in Victoria where the Higher Education and Skills Group (HESG) is the administering body (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2015). The TAFE division of the organisation is the specific site of this study and is part of a system whose genesis emerged in 1974 with the Kangan Report on *Needs in Technical and Further Education* (Burns, 2002). The Kangan Report defined the roles and the mission of what is now known as the TAFE system with a traditional focus on public training with public funding (DEEWR, 2008; DEECD, 2013).

Victorian TAFE Institutes operate under a structure of autonomous governance. TAFE Boards are ultimately responsible to the Victorian Minister for Training and Skills. Board Directors of each TAFE comprise 9 to 15 persons and more than one half of each Board is appointed by the Minister. Boards include the CEO and elected student, staff representatives. The Directors are individuals with knowledge of industry and community training needs and are appointed on the
basis of governance skills related to education and training. Their skills include public sector or corporate management, finance, law, organisational development, risk management and strategic planning (Victorian TAFE Association, 2015).

The TAFE environment is historically influential within the VET sector and is increasingly developing a commercial emphasis (Productivity Commission, 2011). However, the VET environment is complex with a disparate set of stakeholders from a vast array of industry proponents who bring their own specific set of agendas.

The operating revenue of publicly funded VET by Australian, state and territory governments in 2013 totalled $8.5 billion, an increase of 1.4 per cent from 2012 (NCVER, 2014a). In the period from 1993 to 2012 the number of TAFE institutions within the VET sector in Victoria went from 32 to 18, with Victoria retaining the largest number of TAFE institutions in any state (DEECD, 2013, p. 12). Nonetheless the cuts instituted by the subsequent Victorian governments resulted in four TAFE campuses closing and a ‘net deficit of $16.2 million, a decrease of $74.8 million from the $58.6 million surplus in 2012’ (Victorian Auditor General, 2014, p. 19). Ten TAFE institutions reported a reduced financial result in 2013, with seven of these ‘reporting an operating deficit in 2013 compared with four in 2012. The results were affected by a decrease of $116.3 million—15 per cent—in [Victorian] government operating and capital grants’ according to the Victorian Auditor General (2014). For 2014 the ten TAFE institutions reported a combined deficit of $84.3 Million (Victorian Auditor General, 2015).
In relation to students, the *Victorian Training Market Report 2014*, recorded ‘443,687 students enrolled in government subsidised training in 2014; this was eight per cent lower than 2013’ (HESG, 2015, p. 4). The report also recorded that 63 per cent of all government-subsidised enrolments were at the Certificate III to IV levels in 2014, down by one per cent on the 2013 result. TAFE institutions’ proportion of government subsidised enrolments dropped by 33 per cent from 207,943 in 2013 to 139,182 in 2014. Indicative of the trend to privatise training delivery in Victoria was the finding by the HESG (2015) that over half (56 per cent) of all government-subsidised enrolments were with private RTOs. TAFE institutions received 25 per cent of this subsidy in 2014, down from 32 per cent in 2013.

The election of the Victorian Labor Government in November 2014 resulted in a pledge of a $320 million TAFE rescue fund and a review of funding for the Victorian VET system (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2014). According to the Victorian Minister for Skills and Training, government contributions to public ‘TAFEs have fallen from $733 million in 2011 to $468 million in 2014’ (Victorian VET Funding, 2015). These funding changes have unsurprisingly caused considerable consternation, stress and risk in the TAFE division of the VET sector. Changes such as these informed questions asked of practitioners relating to how valued they perceived their work to be.

**Competency framework**

For those unfamiliar with the VET sector it is crucial to understand the nature of VET’s competency-based approach to training, given that it does not use a
content-based curriculum in the way that other education sectors traditionally do. The national development of CBT gained momentum from the recommendations of the Carmichael (1992) and Mayer (1992) reports, which promoted a holistic view of whole work roles and generic personal skills (Burns, 2002; Harris & Hodge, 2009). Since the commission of these reports, competency based training has continued to develop and reviewed to understand what constitutes a satisfactory set of skill and how that might be assessed. Training packages are built on assessable outcomes, ‘a training package is a set of nationally endorsed standards and qualifications used to recognise and assess people’s skills in a specific industry, industry sector or enterprise’ (DEEWR, 2008, p. 6).

National competency standards are a regularly reviewed and strictly controlled set of performance measures that must be demonstrated in order to achieve the specified qualification (ASQA, 2015b). Assessment requires a measure of judgment; review and reflection to be demonstrated by VET practitioners in order to comply with the changing experience of competency based training and assessment (Burns, 2002, p. 54; Mitchell & McKenna, 2006, Hodge, 2014). VET practitioners are potentially exposed to risk through this process, understanding the nature and response to risks, such as these, informed the design of this research.

A long-standing site of contention in VET education has been the interface between behaviouralist and constructivist knowledge production (Burns, 2002). While all education is a form of knowledge transfer and development, the VET sector has at its centre a specifically vocational epistemological framework
informing its practice and purpose. Critiques have cited the requirement to demonstrate the behavioural skills of competence as a potential lack of engagement and interpretation of theoretical substance (Burns, 2002; Harris & Hodge, 2009; Hodge, 2007). While it is true that vocational education is focused on the practical demonstration of specified competencies, critical aspects of evidence for assessment require evidence of sufficient levels of underpinning knowledge and cognitive assimilation and/or synthesis of such knowledge to grasp and interpret the underlying principles (Bloom, 1956; Hodge, 2014).

There are also issues of change over time and how the understanding of competency has shifted and this remains a complex debate in achieving universal agreement on the nature and merit of the competency framework (Guthrie, 2009; Harris & Hodge, 2009). The debate relating to the interface of knowledge and skill demonstration characterises the complexity for VET practitioners in their day-to-day experience as they manage course compliance requirements.

**National training packages and qualifications**

Integral to the delivery of a competency based training system are training packages that define the parameters and rules for attainment of qualifications. Training packages include a set of nationally endorsed standards for training delivery and assessment that enable assessors to judge an individual’s performance against the eligibility criteria of specific AQF qualifications (ASQA, 2015c).
Training packages are benchmarks that describe the skills and knowledge that individuals need to demonstrate to perform effectively in specific workplace roles. Contrary to their name, training packages do not describe how an individual should be trained. They describe the expected performance outcome for an occupation, role or function at a specified level of competence. Vocational educators are responsible for developing the delivery strategies, learning and assessment strategies, appropriate to learners’ needs, abilities and circumstances (Toze, 2009; ASQA, 2015b). The endorsed components of a training package comprise of the following three elements (ASQA, 2015c):

- **Units of Competency**—which define the skills and knowledge to operate effectively in employment and how they need to be applied.

- **Qualifications**—groups of units of competency ranging from certificate 1 to the vocational graduate diploma.

- **Assessment guidelines**—the industry’s preferred approach to assessment, including the qualifications required by assessors, the design of assessment processes and how assessments should be conducted.

Training packages are fundamentally about assessment of skills competence. These inform the teaching and learning content and assessment strategies required to meet the components of training package standards and their associated qualifications. VET training packages have undergone numerous iterations, which must be interpreted by VET practitioners, since the introduction of National Training Packages in the Australian education environment (Hodge, 2013, 2014).
The requirement for commonality within these various iterations has been spawned by the need to manage risk in educational institutions delivering training package qualifications and in government workforce capacity building. ‘Risk’ with its attendant potential to jeopardise registration, and thereby funding for educational institutions, increasingly elicits compliance practices designed to standardise teaching and learning behaviours; thereby limiting overall risk to the organisation (Grace, 2008). In the process this creates other risks by narrowing the operational repertoire for VET practitioners and potentially narrowing learning outcomes for students (Black & Reich, 2010; Grace, 2008).

The vocational sector, along with education generally, has seen decades of reform resulting in the establishment of an increasingly competitive marketplace within which the management of ‘risk’ is achieved through high levels of scrutiny, auditing and review (Ball, 2003a; Black & Reich, 2010; Chappell, 1998; Hope, 2005; Starr, 2008). These changes have not occurred in a vacuum but rather are the result of increasing globalisation and an economically competitive education market. The impact of these reforms continue to generate risk responses

**Role of the VET practitioner**

Readers familiar with the VET sector may be aware of the changing role of the VET practitioner. However, for those less familiar with these changes, the following information is also provided given its significance to this thesis and VET practitioner experience.
The notion of the ‘new VET practitioner’ emerged in the early 2000s; it is focused on helping the learner achieve his or her goals, and seeks to meet industry and community expectations (Black, 2009; Mitchell, 2008a, 2008b). In some ways this discourse attempts to manage change in VET through recasting the role of VET practitioners. One of the significant and expanding expectations of VET practitioners has been the levels of current and relevant industry experience that they bring to their teaching (Smith, Brennan-Kemmis, Grace & Payne, 2009). Under the expanding requirements of the AQTF VET practitioners are required to demonstrate currency and competence to meet current audit requirements. These two foundations of VET practice have evolved from a sector that has traditionally drawn on workplace trainers and trade qualified practitioners identifying with their field of expertise.

Clearly, practitioners are expected to have current experience within their discipline or area of qualifications and skills to bring to their teaching practice (ASQA, 2015a, 2015b). What has not been as clear is the way that this can be readily achieved, particularly in TAFEs within the VET sector, where some practitioners have traditionally taught full-time in front of a classroom of students. On the other hand, growing emphasis on partnerships with industry organisations and workplace projects and assessment provides opportunities for VET practitioners to engage with current industry practice. In addition, many VET practitioners are part-time or casually employed and have other employment within their area of expertise. This greater industry emphasis in conjunction with strategies to personalise learning underpins the idealised VET practitioner’s role in today’s knowledge society (Mitchell & Ward, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011).
A paradigm shift has therefore occurred within the role from expert practitioner to learning manager (Lash, Szerszynski, & Wynne, 2001). There has been a conflation of these differing role concepts, alongside increasing uncertainty, growing risk compliance and complexity within the sector (Mitchell & Ward, 2010). The lack of consistency in the language and concepts used to identify the ‘VET practitioner’ highlights the complexity of identity for those working in this area of education. For example, teacher, facilitator or trainer and are some of the terms used almost interchangeably (Smith, 2001; Grace, 2005, 2008).

Frequent political and policy interventions in TAFE are a consequence of the nature of a vocational sector that is sensitive to changing workforce and skills requirements (Marginson, 1997; Brown, 2011). Government workforce policy and training funding have direct and immediate consequences for VET practitioners and have created considerable consternation and a perceived ‘identity crisis’ for many VET practitioners.

**Thesis structure**

The structure of this thesis follows a model where relevant literature is reviewed, in this case in the following two chapters. The first of these, chapter two, examines risk, modernity and meaning within sociological thought. It investigates the outworking of risk at the organisational level and the flow-on to individual VET practitioners. Chapter three investigates the impact of risk through compliance systems on VET practitioner experience. A targeted literature review in these two chapters locates the research within overarching notions of risk and the subsequent impact risk may have on TAFE and individuals within the
VET sector. These two chapters of literature review ground the research in a body of knowledge that frames and contextualises the ensuing findings.

Chapter four provides a justification for the choice of methodology and methods used to conduct this research. A brief outline of the research strategy using grounded theory methodology follows with a description of the processes of data gathering, analysis and theory building. The participant cohort is described including their VET practitioner roles and experience. Limitations and ethical considerations also find a place in this chapter.

The subsequent chapters, five, six, seven and eight, present the findings that have emerged from the research. These chapters discuss the ways in which risk, manifests through compliance systems and its impact on VET practitioners’ experience. They outline the motivation and commitment VET practitioners demonstrated to the notion of the community obligations of TAFE. The chapters investigate a range of work related issues including unpaid overtime, feeling undervalued, VET practitioner identity, and managing diverse and difficult student cohorts. In addition, they examine the stress and disruption of changes to funding, and the inevitable restructuring that is part of the unstable VET environment.

The final chapter summarises VET practitioners’ commitment to the community obligations of TAFE, the central role of VET practitioners’ in skills development and the vital role they play in the Australian community and economy. Further areas of study and action are outlined relating to the recognition of VET
practitioners’ unique place in the education sector, review of the compliance systems in TAFE and the organisation as well as the stress and workload created by the current approaches to VET practice.
CHAPTER TWO: Risk, modernity and meaning

Introduction

This chapter documents the increasing prominence of ‘risk’ within sociological thought and social interactions in the later decades of the 20th century and the first decades of this century. In fact, the substantive claim of ‘risk society’ is that a paradigm shift from ‘pre-modern’ and ‘modern’ has occurred, which has changed society at a fundamental level (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Lash & Urry, 1994; Smart, 1993).

The changing meaning of risk over time contextualises the contents of this chapter, allowing a risk perspective to be developed and discussed. Of fundamental importance for this research are the changes in conceptualising risk, and the outworking of risk through changes in TAFE compliance systems and the impact on VET practitioners. The chapter will examine the meaning of risk, the changing nature of risk, reflexive modernisation and individualisation.

Risk and meaning: A definition

Defining what is meant by ‘risk’ is a necessary start for an interrogation of the topic, as the understanding of ‘risk’ has changed in meaning and use over the centuries. The Latin riscum was used in Europe before references in German and English appeared in the mid sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Luhmann, 1993, p.9). An Arabic word ‘risq’ related to riches or good fortune and the Greek ‘rhiza’ for cliff are among contenders for the original etymology of the term (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 91). Some more contemporary dictionary definitions of risk
are ‘a chance of disaster or loss’, or to ‘put in jeopardy’, (Collins Dictionary, 1990); ‘the possibility of meeting danger or suffering harm or loss; a person or thing causing a risk’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2003). Furedi’s (1997, p.17) definition goes further; ‘Risk refers to the possibility of damage, injury, illness, death or other misfortune associated with a hazard. Hazards are generally defined to mean a threat to people and what they value’.

There are a number of specific and complex terms and definitions of risk used in the insurance sector and by actuaries; these are not central to the concept of risk as it is used in this research. Integral to understanding the significance of risk in vocational education and training is a cognisance that risk is generated within a values framework that assigns worth. Therefore, the ways in which a society defines risk and orients itself to ameliorate that risk exposes its social, community, material and philosophical values. Risk therefore, has a socio-cultural epistemology (Lupton, 1999; Douglas, 1985; Beck, 2006).

Of course, risk is hardly a new concept. Reaching back into pre-history to respond to the question of risk is in many ways beyond 21st century Western imagination. Risk during this time was often imminent and physical in ways that no longer resound in daily life. The risk of serious injury, wild animal attack, tribal war and mysterious diseases were all part of everyday experience, and while strategies to contain these risks and describe their specific features abound in the anthropological evidence they frequently appear as acts of nature, God or the gods (Douglas, 1985, 1992).
The changes in Europe in the Middle Ages, while significant, did not free people up from the daily risks of death through disease, injury, hunger and warfare (Lupton 1999). Muchembled (1985) categorises popular strategies of dealing with risk during this period, such as, pilgrimages to shrines, the wearing of amulets and superstitions such as avoiding crossroads, as measures used to contain risk and manage the fear of events outside the control of individuals in pre-modern European Society. Many of these practices have fortunately not survived into late modernity, as identification of risk takes place in the specific socio-cultural and historical contexts in which it is located (Furedi, 1997; Luhmann, 1993; Wilkinson, 2001; Pidgeon, Kasperson & Slovic, 2003).

Risk through the course of history did not always engender negative meanings (Ewald, 1991; Hope, 2005). The emergence of the insurance market in association with maritime ventures in the Middle Ages presupposed beginnings that have positive and negative possibilities (Hope, 2005; Lupton, 1999; Singh, 2010). The notion of human fault was not pre-eminent at this time given the vagaries of sea faring. Douglas (1992) indicates that it was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the concept of risk broadened to the current dominant approach of calculable probabilities and the inclusion of modern notions of man-made risk. Over time the positive usage of the term risk has been eclipsed to the point where risk now commonly evokes ‘negative’ impacts and concepts (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003, p. 17). Moreover, risk has become normalised and normative as an issue that can and indeed must be responsibly managed by governments, institutions, organisations and individuals.
While pre-modern society was community centred and at the mercy of inexplicable natural elements, the beginning of changes leading to understanding risk in the modern era can be seen from the mid fifteenth century (Turner, 2006; Douglas, 1992). Accelerating changes ensued from the eighteenth century, when ‘challenges to religious authority and the development of rationalisation facilitated new ways of understanding the world’ in the centuries that followed (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2006, p.253). Modernity is characterised as a period of history and social relations that have promoted significant democratic and industrial change. Notions of risk have also altered in response to changes through history and the development of new understandings of the nature of risk.

The nature of risk

Some risks are due to natural disasters such as floods, tornados, cyclones, volcanic eruptions and mudslides and require avoidance-based remedies such as dams, physical barriers or earthquake strengthening in building construction. These risks are chronicled back to antiquity and are part of human experience. Other risks such as those of particular interest in this research involve financial markets, climate change and pollution, which are distinctively human in cause. These risks, along with those under investigation in this research, are derived from a complex juxtaposition of social, political, economic and cultural relationships (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Lupton, 1999).

Throughout the late 20th and into the 21st century concepts of ‘human derived’ risk have developed a pervasive influence in an increasingly globalised and instantly connected world. Situations that address the question of, ‘What is risk?’
now include the globalisation of terrorism in the events of ‘9/11’, when fundamentalist Islamic terrorists flew passenger aircraft into the Pentagon and the Twin Trade towers in New York. Similarly, events such as the Asian Economic Crisis in 1997 and the Global Financial Crisis, which commenced in 2008, exposed the international community to heightened financial risks that reverberated around the world (Holzer & Millo, 2005). Additionally, environmental risks relating to the nuclear reactor failure in Japan in 2011 after the Fukushima tsunami, the Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010 and the PTTEP Australasia oil spill off the Western Australian coast in 2009, demonstrate the growing global influence of the nature of risk. Many environmental disasters continue to cause damage long after their occurrence such as the massive Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 and the nuclear reactor disaster at Chernobyl in 1986. They coalesce to demonstrate the proximity and significance of these new global risks to the world community. Many events consequently pose complex risks that have a ‘global’ rather than ‘national’ impact (Scott & Marshall, 2009, p. 652).

Macro risks on the global scale, demonstrated above, have an impact that frequently cascades down to change the ways in which organisations and institutions behave (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003; Stateman, 2010). One of the most commonly experienced examples of this phenomenon demonstrates how the impact of risk drives compliance systems. This has occurred in airport security where organisational and institutional responses have resulted in stringent security policies and procedures to address the risk of terrorist attacks (O’Malley, 2006). The reader familiar with long queues passing through security screening
checkpoints can quickly make the connection between global risk and the security and compliance systems now used to mitigate them.

Heightened security concerns demand risk management policies and compliance practices within organisations. Organisations engage in location specific strategies to ensure that risk is responsibly managed through security services, policies and procedures. Indeed, ameliorating risk has become a fundamental activity for educational institutions. The spectrum of risk is wide, for example, risks within the physical environment for staff and students, occupational health and safety risks, risks to organisations’ reputation, the financial risks born of growing imperatives to engage in commercial educational ventures to raise capital, risks to research programs and funding, the list could continue almost indefinitely (Power, Scheytt, Soin & Sahlin, 2009; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003).

Pursing the impact of risk further, it is clear that risk is not confined to organisations and institutions alone. The flow-on effect continues to the micro or individual level. Risk is calculated by individuals on a daily basis in a multitude of ways, for example, physical safety, financial security, career advancement, along with mental and emotional wellbeing. Risk practices and discourses therefore, permeate all levels of personal and professional life (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003) and are amplified in the compliance driven systems in many sectors.

While the above discussion details conceptions of risk in a general sense, the discussion that follows engages with specific theorists and theoretical approaches to risk. These are examined under the content headings of risk perspectives,
reflexive modernisation and individualisation. The space allocated in this chapter does not allow examination in minute detail of all aspects of, and research on, risk. Nonetheless, the themes that follow outline major features of risk theory that are pertinent to the questions posed in this research.

**Changing risk perspectives: An overview**

Risk discourses have become defining feature of the late 20th and early 21st centuries and owe much of their initial impact to the work of German Sociologist, Ulrich Beck. Beck’s (1992) seminal political analysis of risk in his work *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* posits the concept of a ‘risk society’ in which risk has become privatised, objectified and is a matter for individual concern. Concurrently with Beck, Giddens (1990; 1991) examined risk and developed concepts of trust and identity through the lens of reflexive modernisation (Breakwell, 2007). Additionally, the work of Douglas (1966; 1992) provides an approach to risk from anthropology where risks are constructed through a ‘functional structuralist approach to taboo and purity, risk and blame’ (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003, p. 6.). Douglas theorises the nature of an individual’s membership in a community/society and the culturally learned and shared assumptions of that society. Lash’s (1993, 2000) aesthetic approach to risk leverages off these notions and identifies self-interpretation as the basis of aesthetic reflexivity.

It will be useful at this point to distinguish between two main perspectives in conducting an examination of risk, the objectivist and social constructionist approaches. An underlying purpose of this thesis is to critique risk theory, in relation to its impact on VET practitioners’ identity, through compliance systems.
As the social construction of identity is of particular interest for this research a constructionist approach was selected as possessing the greatest utility. Objectivist approaches are therefore, not fully examined in this thesis.

Historically, the dominant approach to risk has been from an objectivist perspective located in techno-scientific practices using heuristics that tend to be situated in psychological and cognitive research practices (Breakwell, 2007). These examine responses to risk cognitively and behaviourally. In this view risk is understood as an independent variable and the response to it as dependent (Lupton, 1999). Objective ‘facts’ are calculated by experts and contrasted with the subjective response of lay people—the latter considered less accurate and reliable than the objective facts (Slovic, 1987; Oliver, 2005; Joffe, 1999). Sole reliance on ‘objective facts’ as the legitimate measure of risk can be argued as a denial of the socio-cultural environment in which risk knowledge is constructed. Traditionally, critiques of these risk approaches have focused on the technical validity and reliability of the model and methodology of research when clearly the denial of socio-cultural influences restricts the utility of this approach to theory and has come under challenge (Lupton, 1999; Breakwell, 2007).

Understandings of risk in this perspective are characterised as neutral and free of bias holding to the notion of objectivity. That objective risks exist and people respond to them subjectively is a simple summation of the problem seen by Lewens (2007, p. 14) from a philosophical approach, ‘what we might call the theoretical ethos of the scientist—the desire to discover the truth—which is out of phase with what we might call the practical ethos of the regulator—the desire to
ensure safety’. Lewens’ positivist demonstration highlights the difficulty of ‘truth’ as a way of meaning-making. In this situation both the scientist and the regulator negotiate meaning, albeit for different purposes but for both of them it is clearly a meaning-making experience. This being said, a realist ontology is not incompatible with objectivism or constructionism as conceptual approaches to risk (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1986, 2005).

Tulloch and Lupton (2003) outline the increasing difficulty of an objectivist paradigm, built on positivist views of science and technology. Such views fail to address the growing conflict with public sentiment and the developing disquiet about ecological, health and lifestyle risks. Further, the continuing drive to bring together practical science and the community fails to address the underlying suspicions that communities have about the capacity of science and technology to provide answers to all the pressing needs of humanity (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). Frewer et al. (2003) posited that distrust of the motives of industry and government are a feature of late modernity and the growing risk discourse. It is therefore reasonable to question notions of risk within statistical calculations and predictive modelling that do not disclose ‘concepts of value’ in the ways risk is allocated to specific phenomenon and not others. Logically then, risk questions within this research become, as Scott (2000, p. 43) insists, questions of Durkheim’s egocentrism and altruism that ask, ‘what is risk’ and ‘whose risk’ is it? Questions important to this research.

In contrast to objectivist views, constructionist theoretical perspectives of risk acknowledge interactions of the social world in which meaning is made (Crotty,
1998; Lupton, 1999). Risk analysis within this epistemology emphasises the socio-cultural perspectives of risk and as a consequence paradoxically forms the basis of critique for the perspective of objectivism (Dean, 1999; Lupton, 1999). Many issues are understood in terms of risk and constructionist discourses have encompassed matters of ecology, health, economics, psychology and sociology and governmentality (Beck, 1992, 2000a, 2009a; Furedi, 1997; Giddens, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1999; Lash, Szerszynski & Wynne, 2001; Lupton, 1999). Eminent among this compilation of work is that of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas whose theories elucidate cultural/symbolic perspectives. Douglas investigated taboos, contamination, the body, selfhood and blame to understand why some hazards or dangers are identified as risks and others are not (Douglas, 1966, 1992).

Susarla (2003), extends the notion of blame to organisational behaviour and demonstrates the extent to which risk responsibility is distributed through blaming rituals such as those associated with environmental disasters. Examples such as the chemical spill in Bhopal, India, and the Mexico Gulf oil spill demonstrate blame distribution that resulted in fines and prosecutions, job termination and transfers and punishment at the individual level. In Australia, the floods in 2011 resulting from the failure to reduce the levels of the Wivenhoe Dam in Queensland during a period of exceptional rainfall, resulted in a Commission of Inquiry that demonstrates Douglas’ blaming rituals (‘Angry flood victims’, 2011).

Engaging a functional structuralist approach Douglas posits that risk is situated in complex social relationships and social order. Risk acts as a functional strategy
for maintaining boundaries, and the ‘other’ in managing social deviance (Douglas, 1992; Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982; Lupton, 1999). Boundaries pose particular risk given the proximity of danger and the notion of straddling risky margins. Also, significant to her thesis is an understanding of the ‘other’ as a strategy for dealing with risk and danger, thereby locating real or imagined fears or disunity outside accepted norms and boundaries (Hope, 2005; Wilkinson, 2001).

However, in some situations, ‘otherness’ is not always a negative experience nor excluding; it can form part of complex and positive cultural practices. Many ‘pop stars’ go to extraordinary lengths to develop ‘otherness’ through risky behaviours around the borders of social acceptance. Extreme sports are another example of risky behaviour at the margins of personal safety and social acceptance that are part of risk taking that may be an act of pleasure, self-actualisation or resistance of behavioural prescription (Giddens, 1991; Breakwell, 2007). Douglas demonstrates the cultural context in which individuals and groups make decisions and assess risk; these can lead to conflict with ‘expert’ judgments that fail to consider such contexts. Foucault (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1999), Beck (1992, 2009a) and Giddens (1991, 2009) acknowledge the central role of expert systems of knowledge, although Foucault does not directly address risk. Nonetheless, Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ places the individual at the centre of a web of expert systems of knowledge supporting the central feature of knowledge discourses in risk concepts (O’Malley, Rose, & Valverde, 2006). While Douglas provides a pervasive critique of realist approaches, her tendency to minimise risk to a metaphor or trivialise hazard is noted by Lupton (1999).
Additional criticism is levelled at the capacity of her work to be interpreted by those wanting to imply that cultural and social contexts and processes contaminate non-expert perceptions. Wilkinson (2001, p. 15) goes so far as to claim that Douglas (and Beck) are more concerned about presenting political interpretations of the significance of risk for our current period of modernity rather than theorising the cultural and social complexity of ‘risk consciousness’. On the contrary, as Elliot (2002) points out, attempting to control risk to promote a predictable future must by implication make risk a political issue. Although Douglas’ work predates the work of many ‘risk society’ theorists, most fail to engage in a substantial way with her approach (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). Beck does make comment and rejects her assertion of risk as an ‘anthropological constant’ (Beck, 2009a, p. 7). Nonetheless, the work of Douglas is foundational and insightful and continues to stimulate further applications and debate (Hope, 2005; Kahan, Slovic, Baman, & Gastil, 2006; Kusch, 2007; Lupton, 1999).

In contrast Beck’s concepts of risk postulate new dimensions of political, social and cultural life that have utility for this research. In concert with his contemporary, Giddens, he approaches the phenomenon of risk from the perspective of modernity (Lupton, 1999). They both draw heavily on the concept of reflexivity, which posits that as a society examines itself in response to the process of modernity it fundamentally changes. According to Giddens, a risk society is a ‘runaway world’ that is ‘increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk’ (Giddens, 1999, p. 3). The approach to risk taken by Giddens, although similar to Beck’s, identifies the change, isolation and disaggregation of society as problematic and emphasises the
role of trust in expert knowledge systems and institutions. Beck understands these exigencies as an opportunity and a catalyst for the regrouping of social and political movements through the ‘cosmopolitan moment’ (2009a, pp. 55-56).

Beck (1992; 2000a; 2009a) defines risk society as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself. Beck approaches risk from the macro and political level while Giddens (1990; 1991, 1992; 1999) examines risk from the locus of institutional forces, relationships and individuals. Giddens and Beck take divergent pathways in relation to risk and perceptions of risk. Giddens promotes the notion that risk perception has grown rather than the intensity and frequency of actual risks that Beck identifies. Similarly, in relation to reflexivity, differences mean that Beck produces a critique of expert knowledge that results in distrust, as opposed to Giddens’ understanding that reflexivity takes place because of trust in expertise (Lupton, 1999). This dichotomy is further developed under the following section on reflexive modernisation to provide a framework for the findings in following chapters.

Central to Beck’s thesis are models of economic distribution. Traditional economic models of distribution involving Marxist understandings of capitalism and the production of ‘goods’ have experienced a paradigm shift in which the production and exchange of ‘bads’ are now a fundamental feature (Beck, 1992). This is seen in environmental events and the potential for catastrophic globalised risks that effects social class and dissolves its traditional class identity, thus creating the individualised social actor. Both Lash (1994; 2000) and Giddens
(1990; 1991) expand this notion of the universal risk actor to account for ‘aesthetic, affective and cultural aspects of risk ideas’ (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). Concepts of risk are informed by a diversity of perspectives that postulate its political, social and cultural dimensions and are therefore important for this research.

Both Giddens and Beck point to the symbiotic nature of risk that is evident in the ‘critique’ of post modernity. Post modernity operates by critiquing modernity, which turns in upon itself to expose unforeseen consequences of the enlightenment progress. Post modernity needs to be understood as evidence of the success not failure of modernity (Appardurai, 1996; Beck, 1992; 2000a; Giddens, 1991; Oliver, 2005b). This process means that, ‘incalculable risks and manufactured insecurities resulting from the triumphs of modernity mark the conditio humana at the beginning of the twenty-first century’ (Beck, 2009a, p. 191). Risk discourse as a growing phenomenon of the 21st century needs to be seen in relation to modernity, and the disquiet about the capacity of traditional sociological theories to elucidate the changes of the late 20th century. The discussion of risk theory for the purposes of this research would not be complete without specific attention to the role of reflexive modernisation that follows.

**Risk complexity: Reflexive modernisation**

Reflexive modernisation is a term devised by Beck and refers to the ways in which advanced or late modernity ‘becomes its own theme’ (Scott & Marshall, 2009, p. 638). It is the process of modernity that ends up critiquing and examining itself, therefore opening up the potential to respond to that examination
and make considered choices and decisions for the future. It defines the recent period of modernity that has moved beyond simple industrialisation to a risk society; where questions of the development and use of technology become ones of political and economic management of the associated risks (Beck, 1992; Beck & Grande, 2010; Elliot, 2002).

The use of the terms ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’ while related are significantly nuanced in terms of understanding their relationship to risk society theory. Beck (1996) explains this distinction, thus:

…it the combination of reflex and reflections, which, as long as the catastrophe itself fails to materialise, can set industrial modernity on the path to self-criticism and self-transformation. Reflexive modernisation contains both elements: the reflex-like threat to industrial society’s own foundations through a successful further modernisation which is blind to dangers, and growth of awareness, the reflection on this situation (p. 34).

While Elliot (2002) challenges the apparent split between reflex and reflection in Beck’s definition, others see risk reflexivity as a symbiotic cycle in which anxiety about risk acts as a catalyst to question and reflect on the practices that lead to such risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990, 1999; Lash, 1994; Apgar, 2006; Furedi, 1997).

The growing globalisation of risk, coupled with communication systems that expose risk in real time to a global audience, triggers demands for international action and engagement. The so called ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011 brought countries together to form international financial alliances to initially freeze the assets of Hosni Mubarak and then Muammar Gaddafi and to provide NATO air strikes in
the case of Libya (Lucas, 2011). Global political and military action, to halt the risk of widespread repression, was supported through a developing international citizenship connected by technology to events as they unfolded (Hosni Mubarak resigns, 2011). Recent events in the Middle East point to Beck’s expanded thesis of ‘World Risk Society’ in which the public sphere of action becomes politicised and globalised (Beck, 1996; 2009a; Beck & Grande, 2010).

Expanding the analysis of reflexive modernisation Lash (1993; 1994) proposes that ‘risk society’ should be displaced in favour of ‘risk culture’. In this schema risk culture(s) is/are not bound by the hierarchical ordering of society and therefore, creates a ‘reflexive or indeterminate disordering’ (Lash, 2000, p.47). Lash’s approach to risk identifies Beck and Giddens as institutionalists who fundamentally believe that it is through new democratically structured institutions that reflexive change will occur. He notes that they make modest claims about these institutions as they have the potential to create new risks. Risk society, according to Lash (p. 50), is thus ‘normatively ordered, vertically structured and individually based’ as opposed to notions of risk culture in which risk is ‘value-disordered, horizontally destructured and community based’. Lash defines a view of reflexive modernisation critical of Beck and Giddens’ appeal to certainty and instead claims that both theorists fail to acknowledge the role of contradiction and contingency sufficiently in their work. It is here that Lupton’s (1999) appeal to the insights of Bourdieu provides a potential solution to these apparent contradictions. The habitual, acculturated and subjective responses to risk that undermine notions of Beck and Giddens’ autonomous reflexive ‘rational actor’ are much more
coherent when seen within Bourdieu’s habitus (Jenkins, 2002). The framework for understanding risk is influenced by ‘habitus’ as Tulloch and Lupton’s (2003, p. 37) study of British and Australian subjects in Risk and Everyday Life found. Life situations (habitus) had an impact on the ways in which participants in the study viewed and responded to phenomena as risks. The study demonstrated that risk operates on many levels and individuals respond from a number of habitual positions concurrently and sometimes in contradiction to the assessment of expert institutional knowledge and rational thought (Lupton, 1999). To the extent that these responses are habitual they demonstrate the ‘reflex’ response to risk but lack a ‘reflection’ on that risk. They are not ‘reflexive’ within the terms of reflexive modernisation as outlined by Beck and should not be understood uncritically as contradictions to Giddens’ and Beck’s approaches. Responses to risk that are emotive and driven by aesthetic values and assumptions (Lash, 1993; 2000) are not simply operating in binary opposition to Beck’s thesis; rather, they reflect the complex, multifaceted nature of risk responses and provide insight for this research.

Further, this research acknowledges divergent positions exist regarding the prevalence of risk with Beck and Giddens differing significantly in their views. Giddens (1991) identifies sensitivity to risk in late modernity as a result of rising public awareness rather than in an increase in risks themselves. The contrary is true for Beck (1992; 2009a), who identifies risk reflexivity as a response to significant increases in risks. Clearly, awareness of risk has become heightened; however, the last century has seen the exponential development of man-made
risk. While Beck and Giddens’ views are dichotomous, both theorists concur that risk has become a significant issue at all levels of society in the 21st century.

Critiques of reflexive modernisation, as exclusively a product of late or second modernity, challenge this notion by positing that previous periods of time have experienced reflexive modernisation (Lash, 1993; Lee, 2006). While it is true that the seeds of reflexive modernisation were born in the Enlightenment it is the very potential that now resides in the decision-dependent possibility of control over life on earth, including the unprecedented possibility of self-destruction that prompts a deep self-confrontation that can be understood in terms of reflexive modernisation (Beck, 2009a; Elliot, 2002). As a result of these globalised risks ‘difference’ has begun to be ascribed more broadly, appearing in themes of ethnicity, age, gender, nationality and religion as new and emerging forms of ‘differentiation and inequity’ develop (Scott, & Marshall, 2009, p. 638). The challenges and pressures that globalisation and technology have placed on traditional class identification and gender roles are driven through the requirements of greater individual mobility, work force flexibility and economic necessity (Sennett, 1998; Stacey, 2011).

Notwithstanding these changes, class analysis remains a valuable endeavour in what is still an evolving socially differentiated environment (Atkinson, 2011). This does not, however, negate the growing complexity overlaying traditional concepts. Individuals with greater privilege and means may still possess greater capacity to overcome global risk to some extent, although such privilege faces new challenges derived from globalisation (Beck, 1992, 2009a). Examples such
as pollution, climate change and financial crises have the capacity to impact the personal and financial wellbeing of privileged social class positions. This is a world in which traditional forms of collective identification and consciousness, such as class identification and familial ties, are weakening and alternatives are emerging (Waters & Waters, 2010). Social divisions are developing along the lines of information rich verses information poor individuals and groups. New more flexible class divisions (or alliances), speculates Elliot (2002, p. 304), may ‘proliferate in the future due to individualisation’. Consequently, the ordered and normative world of Weberian theory has given way to a world where risk permeates organisational activity and social relations (Sennett, 1998).

Beck (1994, 1996, 2000a; 2009a) promotes an understanding of reflexive modernisation simultaneously compatible with Giddens and Lash and potentially divergent. While these influential theorists agree regarding the crucial role of reflexivity in modernisation, they conceptualise challenges to expert knowledge differently. As identified earlier according to Giddens, reflexivity takes place through experts’ knowledge systems that rely on the trust of the non-expert population (Giddens, 1991, 1999). Beck’s contrary view identifying reflexivity as a critique of expert knowledge systems built on distrust results from risk ‘knowledge and non-knowing’, where many risks from technology are not immediately obvious (Beck, 2009a, p. 117; Griner, 2002, p.149).

The example of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) is a case in point, as it seemed the perfect chemical—non-toxic, non-flammable, odourless—and extremely effective in refrigeration. It was not until 1985 with the discovery of the ozone hole in the
Antarctic, caused by CFCs (that the atmospheric depletion that had been occurring, since the 1930s), was recognised (Beck, 2009a). Years after the use of CFCs were prohibited an enormous ozone hole again opened up over the Arctic for the first time as an unforeseen ongoing side effect of ozone depletion (Metherell, 2011). The legacy of complex technological development and the growing cognisance of the associated risks drives scepticism and distrust in some individuals. Far from deriding this response, in many ways it can be understood as a ‘reasonable and logical’ reaction to risks that appear overwhelming and at times contradictory.

Reflexive modernisation feeds into a cycle of distrust with significant consequences for established institutions whether they are scientific, governmental or industrial. Distrust then flows on to erode individual connectedness by weakening communal organisations and diminishing trust in all forms of government, which subsequently has a cascading negative affect on social cohesion (Markus, 2011). The cumulative effects of these changes permeate existing organisations and institutions that depend upon the continuity of traditional social and political relationships for their legitimacy (Scott & Marshall, 2009; Power, 1997). Commensurate with other educational sectors, TAFE within the VET sector has felt the impact of changes in traditional social relationships, workforce participation and rising educational demands. Additionally, commercial funding requirements through increased international student intakes and commercial projects are perpetually increasing necessities. Educational institutions are required to generate increasing funding through intakes of international students, and to deliver increasing research outputs to
maintain their financial viability. Higher education has changed dramatically over the last three decades. Where once it comprised a small number of publicly funded institutions these numbers have grown significantly and there are now 37 public universities, two private universities and 150 or so other providers of higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). These changes are particularly important for this research, which is based in a dual sector institution that is impacted by such changes.

Risk theory provides a framework within which to locate changes in the education sector in Australia as a consequence of changing globalised forces that continue to make their presence felt at institutional and individual levels. This requires a cognisance of global changes through a reflexive approach to future planning and policy (Bridge, 2005; Bradshaw, 2005). The consequences of global change for the individual VET practitioner can be examined through the process of individualisation. The intersection of global risk and individual responsibility is mediated through individualisation, thus providing a standpoint from which to theorise the experience of VET practitioners.

**Risk responsibility: Individualisation**

The foundation for this research is the link between risk society theory and individual experience. An underlying premise in this research therefore, rests on the notion that the theory of risk society has the ability to explain a significant shift in risk responsibility from institutions and organisations to individuals (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).
Individualisation in terms of risk society is identified as an outcome of modernity and is the ‘private side of globalisation’ (Lupton, 1999, p. 69; Beck, 2006, pp. 336-342). Risk society brings with it important implications for the individual as it weakens traditional social structures and institutions, encouraging an amplification of risk for the individual. Consequently, neo-liberal capitalist societies promote a ‘structurally institutionalised individualism where the individual is the legitimate addressee of responsibility’ (Canzler, Kaufmann & Kesselring, 2008, p.78). This process of individualisation and personal risk responsibility is central to Beck’s theory (1992, p. 135). The self is increasingly individually constructed, becoming a ‘reflexive biography’, as opposed to the significantly socially constructed processes of previous generations.

Tonnie’s classic typology of *Gemeinschaft* outlines relationships built around close family and community ties that have been ‘over-run’ by *Gesellschaft* relationships that are characterised by individualism, impersonality and contractualism in response to the development of industrial capitalist societies (cited in Wilkinson, 2001, p. 33). In recent decades globalisation has changed traditional workplace roles and the model of ‘a job for life’, with the obligatory gold watch on retirement now belonging to a past generation. Wilkinson (2001, p 29) explains that the expectations of a few generations ago that sons follow their fathers into family professions, the family farm or business no longer holds the cultural currency or economic imperative that it once did in western society.

Clearly, individualisation is not a new phenomenon. The process that enables people to become separate and distinct from each other, acquire selfhood, and
specific rights and responsibilities, has been acknowledged over centuries. During the seventeenth century debate raged about the nature of an individual’s political and legal rights against the state (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2006; Rayner, n.d.). Beck identifies these essentially conflictual positions of power as ‘risk antagonism’. ‘Risks disintegrate systematically into these antagonistic perhaps even incommensurable worlds: those who run risks and define them verses those to whom they are allocated’ (Beck, 2009a, p. 195).

As society increasingly defines itself in terms of risk (Breakwell, 2007) it can be a fraught and stressful experience particularly for those who are not close to the ‘top of the global power pyramid’ (Bauman, 2005, p. 3-4). Bauman (p. 117) likens the experience to that of ‘walking on quicksand’. Beck (2009a) and Giddens (1999) agree that not all social groups are affected similarly by risk. For Ekinsmyth (2000) limits to individual freedom, autonomy and agency still exist through resilient power structures.

Dichotomous uncertainties exist in this context for decision-making. Frequently individuals operate in situations where they do not have the experience, frame of reference or ultimate power to make a decision but modern institutions treat them as if they could do so (Canzler, Kaufmann & Kesselring, 2008). Some workforces such as those in the VET sector are particularly vulnerable to rapid changes in workforce skill demands, government policy and technology (Coates, et al., 2010). Disconnection results when VET practitioners have had little input into the practical application and impact of change that often require significant shifts in VET practitioner skills, knowledge and compliance practices (Black, 2009;
Grace, 2006; Grace, 2008). This exclusion impacts VET practitioner experience and identity.

For those who do not negotiate the anxiety of these changes well the traditional supports of marriage, gender roles, family and community may also be fragmented and fail to provide adequate support. The exponential growth in counselling, therapy and self-education may correlate to new demands for support services for dislocated individuals (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Those individuals who are able to orient themselves to the short-term and abandon the past are most likely to flourish in unstable fragmentary institutions (Sennett, 2005).

Greater conflict in relationships due to individualisation, with its expectations of autonomy and self-fulfilment, are some of the hallmarks of individualisation (Banks & Milestone, 2011; Tams & Arthur, 2010). While significant negative side effects may result from these changes some positive changes also exist. Women have benefited in many ways through an emphasis on individualisation (Tulloch, 1997). Greater freedom to pursue career goals and create an individual biography that is not solely centred on traditional gender roles has precipitated new opportunities for many women (Perrone, 2009). Further, Gidden’s (1992) ‘pure relationships’ that exist solely for their own sake, not social and economic necessity as previously for women, are based on the intrinsic rewards they deliver to the individuals involved. These relationships are perhaps now more possible even if a little utopian.
Bauman’s (2000) notion of ‘liquid modernity’ extends this theme with the notion of ‘fluid’ life changing social positions, intimate relationships and even sexual orientation. Multiple manifestations of the reflexively made self are augmented, as Giddens (1999) identifies, through interventions where the human body is subject to change through cosmetic, surgical and genetic alteration. On the other hand, the result of this freedom, coupled with the weakening of family and community connections means some individuals are disadvantaged. For example, a growing cohort of Australian women, 40 years plus, are said to be at risk of homelessness in later life as a result of gender inequity in workforce participation, low remuneration, inadequate superannuation and a loss of assets through divorce (Sharam, 2011; Tually, Beer & Faulkner, 2007).

Unsurprisingly, the effect of globalisation means that these changes are increasingly prevalent in non-western societies and communities where there are diverse cultural differences to approaches to individualisation (Beck, 2009a; Beck & Grande, 2010). Beck and Grande (2011, p. 426) recognise that there has been some ‘Eurocentrism’ in the development of risk theory. Nonetheless, divergent cultural responses are evident in examples that include individual rights as privileges not legal entitlements in China (Yan, 2010); and a conflict between the British based Australian legal system and reciprocity rights within Australian Indigenous communities (Barber, 2010; Lind, 2010). Diverse though these responses are they mediate rather than halt the growth of individualisation that has become synonymous with modern western culture.
The changing and contradictory nature of the economic, social and political sphere underpins risk society and gives strength to the general application of Beck’s theory (Ekinsmyth, 2000). ‘The blurring of boundaries, the loss of rooted and experienced place in the face of new transnational space leads to a loss of ability to calculate, predict and control on the part of workers. Thus risk society’s ‘incalculability’ enters biography in a meaningful way’ (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003, p. 65). Lash insists that this meaningful way is through a risk ‘culture’ not ‘society’ drawing on ‘habitual, embodied and affective judgements, more subjective than objective’, which exposes gaps in the focus on institutional and structural expressions of risk. Such a schema argues against Beck and Giddens’ theories of individualisation, claiming they are too rigid and institutional. Nonetheless, the purely aesthetic or symbolic analyses of risk are ‘not completely adequate of themselves either’ (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003, pp. 6-7). Increasingly, creating an individual biography demands that members of the community must take the risk and responsibility of choosing ‘an identification’ within a huge array of disparate social, individual, aesthetic and lifestyle groups. Failing to respond adequately to these responsibilities becomes a matter of personal pathology due to the individual’s poor choices and ‘personal inadequacies’ (Lupton, 1999, p.72).

Compounding the emphasis on the individual through the process of individualisation has the potential to create an environment that obscures the impact of structural disadvantage and unequal power relationships (Lupton, 1999; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007). The impact on the individual can be expressed through compliance regimes that operate as risk transfer systems where the
quality function they are intended provide results in curtailing individual creativity (Black & Reich, 2010; Grace 2005, 2008).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of risk society theory to establish a context for the research undertaken for this thesis. It has addressed the question, ‘What is risk?’ within the confines of the research topic and this chapter. As such it has not been possible to elaborate on the many significant nuances that are themselves the subject of much academic publication.

Nonetheless, changes in the nature and significance of risk have been traced from the pre-modern society to the risk perceptions of late modernity. Risk has been demonstrated to be an intrinsic component of the human experience that has become a driving force in globalised social, economic and political systems.

While Beck’s original thesis was located within the context of emerging environmental risk his recent publications have expanded this beginning and developed the concept further. Beck is not alone in his examination of risk and many theorists have undertaken research in this area, significant among the many are Douglas, Giddens and Lash. Each brings a particular understanding of the key concepts of risk theory, globalisation, reflexive modernisation and individualisation.

Beck’s (1992) thesis insists that society is fundamentally changing and needs to be envisioned differently to address these changes. The increasingly globalised
nature of risk adds a layer of complexity to responding to issues such as the global financial crisis or Fukushima nuclear contamination. ‘All theorists agree that we will confront profound contradictions and perplexing paradoxes; and experience hope embedded in despair’ (Beck, 1999, p. 1). Clearly, significant changes have taken place over the last 50 years that have had considerable impacts on social structures. Changes within the economic structures of the globalised financial system, workforce patterns, gender roles and cultural norms have all conspired to disrupt traditionally fixed social and personal identities. Subsequently, individuals are required to construct their own personal and professional biographies and lifestyles and responses to ‘risk’ (Beck, 1992).

It is the question of identity as it relates to risk and compliance systems, experienced by VET practitioners, that chapter three will now address.
CHAPTER THREE: Compliance and VET practitioner identity

Introduction

Although the previous chapter developed the theoretical concept of risk that underpins this research there remains a clear requirement within this chapter to articulate the connections between risk, compliance systems and VET practitioner identity. The two central questions of concern in this chapter are, ‘How is risk reflected in VET sector?’ and, ‘What interplay do compliance systems have on VET practitioner identity?’

The chapter provides a discussion of the complexity of compliance systems and practices that impact the everyday life and experience. It outlines the ways in which the VET sector and its TAFE components must negotiate the challenges of constant compliance driven change. In addition, the chapter includes the development of identity as a theme with reference to the sociological approach of symbolic interactionism.

Compliance and complexity

Throughout this research the term ‘compliance’ is used to convey ‘an action or fact of complying with a wish or command’ (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012). In this form compliance is focused on the actions of the individual to behave or respond to a direction or request in a particular manner. Compliance is also defined as meeting rules, regulations or standards, for example, VET practitioners meeting ‘AQTF quality standards’ in their assessment practices (ASQA, 2015a). In this usage both aspects of compliance coalesce to describe practitioners’ activities.
Additionally, compliance can elicit the notion of complying with a ‘regime’ or ‘coercion’ (Merriam-Webster, 2012). It is clear that a definition of the term compliance may also imply unequal power relationships and the implication of penalties, or potentially negative consequences for non-compliance as identified by some VET researchers (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Calabrese & Roberts, 2001; Black & Reich, 2010). For VET practitioners the notion of compliance could elicit both positive responses (in relation to quality matters) and negative responses (in relation to workload). These responses will be discussed further in this chapter.

Within a ‘compliance system’ the required response is elicited through an organised set of actions and methods (the system) that routinely encourages acquiescence to a practice or performance as a way to manage risk (Power, 1997; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Buchanan & Badham, 2008). Such compliance systems are an integral part of the apparatus through which risk is mitigated within organisations.

Beck’s (2009a) theory of ‘risk antagonism’ sharpens Etzioni’s (1961) identification of the ways in which organisations obtain compliance through power relationships. Etzioni’s (1961, p. 5) research essentially described three ways to categorise power relationships that are simultaneously explanatory and exploratory for risk antagonism; coercive, remunerative and normative power. These power relationships sit at the heart of risk management and are reflected in analogous compliance systems. Coercive compliance systems use power on the
application, or the threat of physical sanctions such as the infliction of pain, deformity, or death, restriction of movement; or ‘controlling through force the satisfaction of needs such as those for food, sex, comfort, and the like’ (Etzioni, 1961, p. 6). Remunerative approaches however, use power through compliance to control material rewards in the form of financial payments (salaries), commissions, fringe benefits and bonuses. The use of normative compliance systems rely on power to manipulate symbolic rewards and ‘deprivations through employment of leaders, manipulation of mass media, allocation of esteem and prestige symbols, administration of ritual, and influence over the distribution of ‘acceptance’ and ‘positive’ response’ (Etzioni, 1961, p. 6).

There are numerous typologies of power that underpin compliance systems expanding those identified by Etzioni. They include referent, expert, legitimate (Raven, 1993), principle-centred (Covey, 1990), Foucaudian based disciplinary concepts of power (Buchanan & Badham, 2008; McKinley & Starkey, 1998). Remunerative and normative power based compliance systems operate within organisations and are therefore informative for this research, although a comprehensive investigation of theories of power is not a focus of this thesis. The operation of compliance systems within organisations highlights a process that is constantly occurring, albeit within the extent to which it is possible for VET practitioners to determine their agency within the structures of an organisation. Giddens (1984) addressed the longstanding sociological dichotomy of structure and agency, which pitched the individual against social structures, through his concept of structuration. Gidden’s (Giddens & Pierson, 1998, p. 77) concept provides a way in which to approach the ‘duality of structure’ that brings
together the dynamic effect of individuals on structure and agency, ‘society only has form, and that form only has effects on people, in so far as structure is produced and reproduced in what people do’. While compliance systems within an organisation’s structure use remunerative and normative power as one method to gain compliance, they do so within the dynamic reproduction of that structure and individuals’ agency, thus opening it up to the possibility of constant change.

A complex nexus also exists between the sociological analysis of Beck’s (1992) ‘risk society’ and the way it is reflected through ‘compliance systems’. To define the impact of risk more clearly, in this thesis risk is referred to through the categorisations of ‘macro’ level risk, which indicates risk within the broad, global, national and state contexts, ‘meso’ level risk referring to risk impacting organisational levels, and ‘micro’ level risk in relation to individuals and local contexts (Swanborn, 2010). There are a numerous constructions of these levels of analysis that are used across and within theoretical frameworks and academic disciplines (Bing, Akintoye, Edwards, & Hardcastle, 2005; Bergström, & Dekker, 2014; Turner & Boyns, 2006). The decision to use this particular categorisation was premised on its clarity and utility for conceptualising the flow of risk from the global level to VET practitioners’ practice. Clearly, this categorisation cannot claim to be definitive, nor does it negate the slippage and interactions that occur within and between these levels. It does, however, expose feedback loops at each level that operate to refine and develop new areas of risk, risk management strategies and compliance systems perpetuating a cycle of burgeoning risk and compliance (Beck, 1999, 2009a; Starr, 2012b, 2015).
The effect of globalisation at the macro level, as per the risk society analysis discussed in chapter two, reflects the growing governance approach to matters that were once the sole realm of national governments. On both the national and international levels governance is used to describe the ways in which decision-making occurs that involves not only government actors but also non-government organisations (Nye & Donahue, 2000; Renn, 2007). Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) note this shift from *government*, where the state assumes responsibility for administration and provision of services to that of *governance*, in which the state administers and manages risk from a distance through a range of compliance and disciplinary technologies. Governance approaches to education within Australia have appeared to support individual response, though paradoxically, have placed restrictions on the nature of that individual freedom through ‘policy frameworks, financial contracts, strategic planning, and administrative guidelines’ (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007, p. 32).

Beck’s (1992; 2000b) risk society analysis therefore provides a constructive conceptual approach for appreciating the ways in which risk is a catalyst for the development of risk management strategies at the meso level. Within VET providers risk management is a catalyst for the development of compliance systems customised to the educational sector and workplace. The impact of risk continues to cascade down to the micro VET practitioner level where compliance systems must be relied upon to ensure that ‘evidence is produced’ to demonstrate that risk management strategies are acquitted (Misko & Halliday-Wynes, 2009, p. 6). Risk theory’s process of individualisation explicates the growing and significant shift of risk responsibility onto the individual VET practitioner (Beck,
Audit processes and quality assurance checks exist to maintain compliance with organisational systems, although VET practitioners are not necessarily powerless to resist these measures and push back against the system.

Risk continues to be reflected in compliance systems through escalating governance and administrative tasks and responsibilities designed to produce evidence and support the compliance trail in VET (Black & Reich, 2010). ‘There is a presumption that having a paper trail reduces risk, ensures efficiency and improves quality management’ (Starr, 2012a, p 103). Clearly, this is partly driven by the impossibility for those with strategic risk responsibility to be engaged directly with its acquittal on the ground. Therefore, VET practitioners are expected to be self-monitoring risk managers, devising risk avoidance and amelioration strategies for all aspect of their professional life to ultimately contain economic and workforce risk (Burns, 2002). This helps to explain the exponential growth in the ‘quality industry’ since the 1980s as an approach to monitoring performance and managing risk through increasingly pervasive compliance systems (Neave, 1988; Power, 1997; Bernhard, 2011). Efficiency, cost effectiveness, compliance and quality assurance have become hallmarks of the response to risk society’s globalised and competitive educational environment over recent decades (Marginson 1997, Brown, 2011).

Risk has traditionally been apportioned through responsibility and authority within leadership models in the education sector (Cunliffe, 2009). Authoritarian models of leadership tend to concentrate and localise risk responsibility quite
visibly within hierarchical systems. In contrast, risk responsibility is located more obscurely in alternative models of leadership such as distributed leadership (Anderson, Moore & Sun 2009). Although Starr (2014a, p. 235) points out that ‘distributed forms of leadership are unlikely to be more fully developed’ while educational policy and practices relating to leadership remain confused.

The concepts of distributed leadership are in Gronn’s (2000) terms, centred on a new paradigm for thinking about leadership and the relationships between actors within educational settings. Spillane (2006) identifies distributed leadership as an analytical tool to assist with examining the co-performance of various routines and how these define leadership practice. The theoretical perspective of Cunliffe (2009) adds to the utility of distributed leadership as an ‘activity’ to be engaged in collaboratively rather than simply a ‘role’ to be played out. Nonetheless, distributive leadership is not without critics who claim this is a reworking of old ideas, specifying similarities with elements of consensus and collaborative leadership (Buchanan & Badham, 2008). MacBeth (2009), citing the example of the biblical character Moses and his attempt to ‘distribute’ leadership, locates its foundations in history.

Nonetheless, other exponents of distributed leadership insist that it is a distinct and original form of leadership, focusing on leadership practice and design structures as differentiators from forms of collaborative leadership such as consensus, co-leadership, democratic or situational (Spillane, 2005; 2006). However, there has developed a fundamental consensus that distributive leadership promotes a model in which all members are responsible, engaged and
valued in the leadership process (Spillane, 2005; Harris & Spillane, 2008). The level of acceptable responsibility and related risk for the individual are issues that require careful consideration.

This approach to educational leadership may hold potential for new ways of ‘doing’ leadership outside the usual hegemonic paradigms of existing practice (Cunliffe, 2009; Starr, 2012b). The merit of distributed leadership as a system and approach to leadership is not under extended interrogation here, rather it serves to support the assertion that the job of education manager/leader is too big for one person (Spillane, 2006; Grubb & Fleesa, 2009; Starr, 2012a, 2012b). The corollary therefore, using the critique of Beck’s risk theory, concludes that the risk is also too big for one person and is individualised within this model through a variety of compliance and administrative systems. These systems operate in VET through the instruments of AQTF audits, quality reviews, VET practitioner competence and currency, evaluation and feedback, student satisfaction surveys, currency and competency monitoring, performance reviews, completion rates and positive student academic results.

Compliance to institutional and organisational practices may be regularly and routinely accepted as natural, justified or expedient, and therefore, according to Butler (1999), Renn (2008) and Blackmore and Sachs (2007) internalised and not questioned. Frequently, the oblique nature of such organisational and institutional practices obscures their intent as Foucaudian (Buchanan & Badham, 2008) perspectives developed through the study of prisons, disciple and control reveal:

...while social institutions and organisational practices may appear neutral, their political role in controlling and regimenting individuals
is often obscured. Foucault’s perspective thus serves to remove that obscurity, opening such practices to challenge and resistance’ (p. 297).

Challenge and resistance to compliance systems and practices at an individual level can develop as a response to the coercive and disciplinary practices used to manage the risk of unwanted outcomes and behaviours (Blackmore & Sachs 2007; Scott, 2001). At a structural level the culture of an educational institution may not correspond to the compliance systems in operation thus creating resistance, stress and incongruence. Universities have traditionally operated from a normative and symbolic reward compliance system that is currently colliding with an increasingly calculative educational environment, consequently causing dissonance and disrupting congruent organisational function (Etzioni, 1961; Scott & Marshall, 2009). Dual sector institutions must negotiate the complexity of normative cultures across higher education and TAFE within the one institution.

At an individual level Beck’s (2009a) ‘risk antagonism’ may manifest as resistance through passive strategies such as the perfunctory completion of compliance reporting and quality audits in VET. In the broader community, examples such as casting a ‘donkey vote’ in compulsory elections may be acts of passive resistance. More assertive risk resistance strategies in contrast, may be seen as direct challenges to the validity of compliance systems as evidenced by actions that intentionally ignore or subvert compliance requirements within VET. In everyday life assertive resistance may take the form of refusing to pay parking fines and challenging these in the courts. However, for those with vested interests in maintain the status quo, the symbiotic nature of compliance systems and power
relations can mean that resistance to ‘disciplinary practices merely demonstrates
and reinforces the necessity for discipline’ (Buchanan & Badham, 2008, p. 294).

Compliance systems elicit complex responses from VET practitioners who may
acquiesce to them through calculated and intentional responses in return for the
benefits perceived and/or gained (Renn, 2008; Breakwell, 2007). There may be
many demonstrable, positive outcomes to be gained by conforming to compliance
systems that are perceived as reasonable ways to ameliorate risk within an
organisation and the community. Enforcement may subsequently be accepted and
maintained, even if unpopular, as a reasonable impost in exchange for the desired
benefits (Le Guen, 2007). Of course, this does not prevent the ‘procedures and
practices’ of compliance becoming contested sites. Acceptance may develop for
the strategic benefit of managing risk; however, the operative compliance system
may remain contentious (Breakwell, 2007; Renn, 2008). VET practitioners
engage in various strategies to manage risk through compliance systems, within
the VET environment on a daily basis.

**Compliance within the VET environment**

Compliance systems within VET generally, and TAFE specifically, reflect
responses to risk concomitant with the growing demands of neo-liberal market
and economic pressures (Harvey, 2007; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Marginson,
1997, 2012). Compliance systems and the accompanying processes are, on the
one hand, an outworking of power and control and an involuntary devolution of
control over risks to produce a standardised outcome. On the other hand, VET
practitioners may challenge this and use the processes as a means to benchmark
their teaching, learning knowledge and practice in productive ways (Mitchell, 2008b). These processes may be expressed through validation and moderation requirements that are simultaneously compliance tasks as well as platforms for the exercise of professional judgement and intellectual debate, much of which VET practitioners found both engaging and professionally rewarding (Davids, 2008; Mitchell, 2008a: Mitchell & McKenna, 2006).

Compliance systems play a significant role in the Australian VET sector, which had an operating revenue of $8.5 billion in 2013 (NCVER, 2014a). Quality educational experiences for students, including those who are international, appear vital for the maintenance of the current tertiary sector’s financial model. The prescriptions of the Bradley Report (2008) confirm Beck’s (1992, 2009a) theory of individualisation via new policy directions in tertiary education that are increasingly driven by individual student demand and responsibility. Ball’s (2003b, p. 7) ‘risk of choice’ appears inflated, through the complexities of two systems, within dual sector organisations where porous boundaries between VET and higher education cultivate student movement and educational choices.

The permeability of some of the traditional boundaries in dual sector universities and institutions now provides a range of pathways for students to move from VET qualification programs to degree courses (Matthews & Murphy, 2010). Conversely, higher education students may be able to complement theoretical degree programs with VET skills based courses. Roberts, Clark and Wallace (1994) uses ‘structural individualism’ in a way that is explanatory in this instance as structural limitations such as increasing fees limit access to courses. The ‘risk of choice’ then begins to oscillate within these organisations.
Clearly, compliance systems have positive functions in expediting the fluidity that exists, forging pathways from VET courses to higher education degrees. Compliance tools and systems may provide a functional platform for agreements to be reached on VET units that can be mapped into components of degree units, thus diminishing the higher education course length for students with relevant VET qualifications. Many VET practitioners experience immense satisfaction in supporting educational development in the life trajectory of their students by facilitating a pathway of ongoing study and learning, some of which is made possible through formal compliance pathways. (Matthews & Murphy, 2010).

Creating such pathways is an achievement given that the introduction of competency-based training in 1988, designed to provide a skilled workforce to serve industry needs, created a sharp curricular differentiation (Wheelahan, Arkoudis, Moodie, Fredman & Bexley, 2012). The movement between TAFE and higher education systems therefore necessitates management of, and negotiation with, the compliance systems operating in both sectors that ultimately compound compliance requirements and workload (Matthews & Murphy, 2010). Meanwhile existing policy vacuums mean that dual sector organisations continue to operate in complex and potentially competing compliance environments, resulting in the multiplication of processes and systems.

Wheelahan, Arkoudis, Moodie, Fredman and Bexley’s (2012) research indicates that universities providing VET programs find VET processes difficult and are inclined to adapt existing university processes to meet the needs of VET. It is here that criticism is also raised in dual sector organisations that VET operates as a
feeder to higher education rather than part of a reciprocal system, where higher education students are equally feeding into the TAFE sector. A further criticism can be levelled that VET pathways may be seen as a way to meet low Socio Economic Status (SES) student intake requirements (Matthews & Murphy, 2010). When this is the case, TAFE compliance requirements can be subordinate to those of the higher education system creating added complexity.

Moreover, it may be argued that VET is part of a changing tertiary sector where higher education has become the ‘benchmark’ and ‘comparator’ to which the VET sector is compared (Beddie, 2010). Moodie (2012, p. 2) notes that, ‘institutional hierarchies are present and arise from the competition for students and funding within an increasingly market-focused tertiary education sector’. The role of compliance is then enacted with the focus on the need of higher education as the first priority. Compounding the continuing silo approach to tertiary education, and the less powerful position of VET, two reports commissioned by DEEWR into the higher education sector, *Review of Australian higher education* and *Transforming Australia’s higher education system*, largely included VET as an incidental issue. Moodie (2012, p. 3) presses the need to develop the sector as a whole, given that there is ‘no coherent national policy on tertiary education’.

It should be noted that recent steps have been taken to begin to align standards in the tertiary sector through the establishment of TEQSA as a regulatory board for higher education. Early initiatives have not been greeted with enthusiasm as Professor Hilmer’s comments that ‘universities are drowning in red tape’ to the National Press Club demonstrates (see Hare, 2012, July 24, p. 5). In the same
report Hare (2012) records Australia’s Chief Scientist Ian Chubb’s account of his advocacy for ‘a national regulator with teeth’, but said it had become ‘a mouthful of teeth and nothing else’.

TEQSA’s attempt to develop coherent architecture within tertiary education capable of managing risk in a positive manner proved difficult. Initial implementation problems and distractions reflect the increasingly unstable environment in which the higher education sector continues to operate in Australia (Bastian, 2013, December 9). Recommendations to unite higher education and VET regulation together under TEQSA have not occurred and it remains higher education focused, potentially missing an opportunity to foster greater coherence in the tertiary sector (TEQSA, 2015). The benefits of a unifying tertiary sector framework may have assisted enabled dual sector institutions to streamline compliances systems.

**Compliance and accountability**

VET policy approaches are not without their own myopic focus. Skills Australia concentrated heavily on the role of the VET sector in meeting industry workforce needs (Moodie, 2012). In 2010 Skills Australia developed the first national workforce development strategy, *Australian Workforce Futures*. However, by 2013 *Future Focus*, the second national workforce development strategy had been developed by the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA). The constant requirement to maximise productivity and strive for innovation has meant that VET has traditionally been more sensitive and reactionary in relation to workforce skill development than higher education (Bretherton, 2011). These
changes bring with them shifts in compliance requirements that need to be managed and acquitted within TAFE in a dual sector institution.

As a consequence Burns (2002) and Davids (2008) contend that vocational education as a public good has been supplanted in favour of containing neo-liberal anxieties regarding the potential risk to industry and business of failing to maintain an inexpensive, reliable, flexible and skilled workforce. Blackmore and Sachs’ (2007, p. 35) study *Performing and reforming leaders* quotes a female middle manager who ‘commented that TAFE is very much a political football, and community responsibility is written in very small print as TAFE is being forced to become privatised and self-sufficient’.

Grace’s (2005) research examines the impact of this trend and reports that ‘compliance’ was used as an instrument of accountability through the influence of skills councils. Traditionally VET practitioners’ voices are poorly represented in compliance systems and on governance bodies, at skills council level, leading to some cynicism, according to Grace, from practitioners:

> Quite how a system as diverse and complex as VET can provide opportunities for genuine input from practitioners and others at the front line is unclear. That it claims to do so but often fails is reflected in a level of cynicism, which I observe at practitioner level within VET. I believe there is a need for further research into the efficacy of the consultation arrangements used in VET and the impact that VET practitioner input to consultations has on VET policy and practice (p. 7).

A multitude of compliance systems exist to manage risk within VET that are informed by the AQTF. The standards required under this framework are outcomes driven and monitored by regulators using compliance acquittal
processes (ASQA, 2011; TEQSA, 2012a, 2012b). These include student satisfaction surveys, completion rates and VET practitioner competency and currency, all of which are regulated through online surveys, compliance documentation, audits, professional development requirements and performance reviews (Lee & Polidano, 2011; David, 2008). Within organisations a set of course documents and practitioner evidence are required from VET practitioners to demonstrate the compliance of the strategy and resources for the units of competence they will be teaching before any teaching commences. Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005, p. 35) identified that with ‘no increase (and sometimes a real decrease) in overall full-time staff numbers, and the growing demands of the management and compliance component of their job roles, teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to “squeeze in” educational work’.

Each level of management for these compliance systems and practices generate audit and administrative processes. An increasingly sophisticated and complex compliance system has driven a greater need for these management practices across the VET sector (AQTF, 2007; ASQA 2015a, 2015b). Administrative support has moved from being somewhat internally focused on the requirements of VET practitioner teaching and learning to outward looking and focused on complying with organisational strategic needs and external review and audit requirements (Guthrie, 2010b). These changes are part of the many challenges in VET and have resulted in more course compliance and administration work being pushed back onto individual VET practitioners, much of it unfunded (Harris, Simons, & Clayton, 2005.) Compliance in VET is a heterogeneous reflection of the need to manage the complex risk environment.
Overzealous compliance systems risk creating a performative environment where repeated performances of compliance processes begin to render normative what commenced as a construct (Butler, 1999; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Etzioni, 1961). Beck’s individualisation of risk responsibility ripples through an organisation’s compliance systems filtering down in support of a performative environment focused on VET practitioner performance measurement and outcomes (Deem, 1998; Ball, 2003a; Black & Reich, 2010; Grace 2008). Performativity can create a reification of the compliance system instituting the necessity to invest substantial amounts of time in its acquittal, which inevitably conflicts with teaching and learning practice, creating anxiety (Black & Reich, 2010; Lumby, 2009).

This anxiety permeates the VET system and is evident in strategies that are built on compliance systems that control the parameters of learning in an attempt to contain the outcomes and limit risk (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Grace, 2008; Lawry & Tedder, 2012; Billett, 2013). Grace (2005b) identifies these tendencies as a displacement of the VET practitioners’ professional authority. Panoptical processes that monitor learning expose the underlying anxiety and fear of failing to meet prescribed quality, policy and financial outcomes and drive risk minimisation responses to develop failsafe systems and multiple levels of compliance monitoring (Halliday-Wynes, & Misko, 2013; Lawy, & Tedder, 2012). Nonetheless, many VET practitioners break free from these constraints through boundary crossings and collaborative innovations that spring up within organisations, and in partnership with other agencies in ways that demonstrate White’s (2010) call to speak ‘over’ performativity rather than speak ‘back’.
Clearly, risk is reflected in complex compliance systems in VET that can concurrently be sites of challenge and catalysts for innovation and improvement or sites of constraint and control. Extrapolating further from the theoretical lens of risk theory also raises the merit of engaging with practices of reflexivity (Beck, 2000a, 2000b; Giddens, 1991; Elliott, 2012). Reflexive modernisation with its process of risk confrontation and reflection may open up the potential to disrupt normalised and normalising compliance systems, thereby creating a space for positive individual and institutional change. Based on the existing evidence an assertion may be made that, at present compliance systems appear to be substantially the response to risk rather than the catalyst for reflexive responses in VET. The direct effect of this environment on VET practitioner identity will be pursued in the following section.

**VET Practitioner Identity: Compliance impact**

In addressing the second question indicated in the introduction for this chapter ‘What impact do compliance systems have on VET practitioners’ professional identity?’ the element of identity is addressed first to provide some context for the direction taken in this research.

The many volumes of academic and popular literature that have been written on the theme of identity and concepts of the self ultimately have their roots in Augustinian and Platonic philosophical thought (Rorty, 2000). They pose questions that are fundamental to human existence. Although the Latin roots of the word, *idem* implies sameness and continuity; identity in the 21st century has paradoxically spawned an immense body of literature contesting that continuity
Bauman, 2004; Du Gray, 2000; Elliot, 2001; Scott & Marshall, 2009). The concept has become so central that notions such as Erikson’s (1964) ‘identity crisis’ have been subsumed into popular culture and language (Cote & Levin, 2002). Clearly, identity may be understood in many ways; however, at a fundamental level it can be understood as the development of a self-concept that is shaped through a variety of individual experiences (Scott & Marshall, 2009).

Categorising epistemological approaches to identity allows for some broad themes to develop, notably the psychodynamic and sociological perspectives of identity (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Both approaches come to the study of identity from a particular standpoint and theoretical lens. Identity is expressed and understood in many different ways and through a range of theoretical applications from Vygotsky’s dialectic approach, with its differences that need to be transcended or overcome in the formation of identity, to Bakhtin’s dialogic approach, where identity is developed within differences and contradictions that are synthesised within the self (Wegerif, 2008). Even so, the substantive quest of the ‘identity project’ remains, whether or not there is an authentic or core self that is static and unchanged deep within the individual to which differing representations of the self need to be reconciled.

The arguments related to sociological and psychodynamic catalysts for identity are joined by the debate captured within the analysis of cultural identities (Bhabha, 2000; Rustin, 2000). The interfusion of identities based on different cultures give rise to a hybridity of identity, which is not simply an assimilation of one culture into another but the development of a new cultural identity through
the fusion of two disparate cultures. An obvious example is the fusion of African culture and American culture through the slave trade to create a distinctive Afro-American culture and identity. These debates represent different perspectives rather than primacy and demonstrate the contention within the subject area. ‘Some of the apparently intractable debates about persons occur when the concerns of one context are imposed on another, in the premature interest of constructing a unified theory’ (Rorty, 2000, p. 379).

In psychodynamic thought the role of a continuous inner framework, although often conflicted, underpins the work of Freud and much of psychodynamic theory (Du Gray, 2000). Analysis of language and psychoanalytics align with Freud’s theory of identification and the theoretical perspectives of Althusser, Lacan and Derrida (Loxley, 2007; Redman, 2000). Lacan uses Freud’s psychoanalytic approach while appropriating Saussure’s linguistic structuralism to describe identity (Elliott, 2001). Lacan’s interpretation produces psychoanalytic themes as metaphors that enable a reworking of the social influences of identity construction. In turn this has provided a space for a cogent feminist interpretation by theorists such as Butler (2000), Sedgwick (Loxley, 2007) and Rose (2000). Identity for Lacan and others building on psychodynamic approaches are substantially more socially constructed than Freud’s biological view (Lumby, 2009). Indisputably, identity can be examined from many theoretical vantage points.

The sociological approach to identity found within the symbolic interactionism notably of Mead (in Shalin, 2008) and Goffman (1959; Elliot, 2001) juxtaposes
intersections with theories of the performative self (Butler, 1999, 2000), reflexive self-identity (Giddens, 1991), postmodern fluid self (Bauman, 2004), multiple and gendered identities (Lumby, 2009, Rose, 2000). Identity as a significantly socially constructed phenomenon has adherence within these approaches, as it is never free of social constructions, hegemonic intent and political significance (Elliott, 2012).

It is clear given the profusion of approaches to conceptualising identity that a congruent theoretical viewpoint of identity needs to be taken in this research. Accordingly, for this research the notion of identity as a ‘performance’ found within symbolic interactionism has investigative resonance with risk theory and it’s outworking in compliance systems and performative norms. Pineau (2005, p. 37) identifies a growing interest in performance metaphors, ‘teaching as a performance is less an observation about instructional style than it is a generative metaphor for educational research’. Goffman’s seminal work (1959), *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* informs this approach through the use of the dramatulogical analogy of the stage to examine social performances in the context of their social acceptability and credibility. Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical analogy of the stage, both front and back of stage, are not a quest for the true (back of stage) and the performed (front of stage) selves; rather, his focus is on the credibility of the performance (Burkitt, 1991). Of course, as with all analogies, the idea that ‘all the world is a stage’ has its limitations.

Goffman’s view is not without its critics and Gouldner (1970) argues that the individual is reduced to a cynical performer devoid of morality in this approach.
Modern consumerist culture with its emphasis on appearances and external impressions, in Gouldner’s view, encouraged performances that were shallow veneers, which is a misinterpretation according to Chriss (2000). Collins (1986), on the other hand, reads Goffman from an entirely antithetical perspective in which values such as respect for others, trust, valuing diversity and acceptance are adhered to as part of an underpinning moral code. Goffman was also criticised for his focus on microsociology, which neglected the macro sociological themes (Burkitt, 1991; Elliot, 2001). He responded that micro interactions were relevant in their ‘own right’ (Goffman, 1983).

The dramaturgical interactionism of Goffman (1959, 1983) investigates social agreement between actors that lead to a consensus over the social norms that will be honoured within an encounter and the social environment in which it occurs. Bauman (2004) argues that this consensus is related to the resources and status of an individual. Those with the greater resource, status, and power may be more able to define the norms to their advantage than those with fewer resources who are more likely to experience greater disadvantage. Within the compliance driven environment of an organisation, performativity ‘helps to locate and describe repetitive actions plotted within grids of power relations and social norms’ (Alexander, Anderson & Gallegos, 2005, p. 2).

Risks theory concurs within the power relations exposed in Goffman’s claims, albeit from the vantage point of macro level risk that disintegrates systematically into risk antagonism where risks are defined and allocated through compliance practices within established power relationships (Beck, 2009a). The ramification
is a reduced capacity for VET practitioners, along with other educators, to protect themselves from risk academically, administratively and physically (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; White, 2010; Hope, 2005).

This risk is demonstrated in VET practitioner currency and competence compliance measures within organisations that are designed to ensure that practitioners have up-to-date experience and relevant qualifications. Competence is understood in very specific terms. The preferred option is for VET practitioners themselves to hold the exact qualification or units of competence that they are teaching. Higher qualifications may have the capacity to demonstrate knowledge in the area but a strong preference exists to have the ‘exact’ qualifications/units so that the risk of non-competence can be ‘totally’ eliminated. These academic risk management strategies executed through compliance systems can result in masking and obscuring the power discourses and risks that underpin compliance (Gleeson & Gunter, 2001; Buchanan & Badham, 2008). There can be a sense of homogeneity and limitation where deviation becomes deviant, thus excluding some VET practitioners.

According to research conducted by Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005, p. 34), VET practitioners’ roles have experienced significant expansion and diversification. There has been no increase in numbers of full-time staff to support extra administrative and management components within teaching roles, ‘teachers have to do more yet have fewer resources to draw on’. The ideal of the ‘New VET Professional’ (Smith, 2010) and growing industry and commercial
Compliance systems in the VET sector create a high-risk endeavour shared by all stakeholders (Guthrie, 2009, 2010a).

Beyond these extra demands are claims from a study by Davids (2008, p. 19) that found ‘teachers were not being fully utilised, their sense of purpose, their personal and professional identity and accompanying value system have not yet been fully integrated into the changing VET environment’. Performative environments created by compliance systems may lead to a devaluing of VET practitioner values (Ball, 2000, 2003a). The performative environment itself may have the capacity to change the performance of individual VET practitioner identity, and more significantly some would argue, change their sense of identity itself–‘who they are’ (Ball, 2003a, p. 215).

Compliance systems impact on VET practitioner identity through a narrowing of practitioner repertoire as much more is prescribed in relation to learning and assessment strategies (Grace, 2005; DEEWR, 2012). Even the lack of a consistent term as identified by Grace (2005b) for adult educators reflects a lack of a universally well-established professional identity. The term ‘practitioner’ means little and is confusing to non-experts in VET and the education sector. ‘Teacher’ and ‘trainer’ each lack attractiveness to people in particular contexts. ‘Facilitator’ has some support, but like ‘practitioner’ has a range of meanings (Grace, 2005). ‘Educator’ is another term that resonates with some paraprofessional on-the-job contexts such as nurse educators. However, the term VET practitioner is both recognised and used within the sector (Smith, Brennan-Kemmis, Grace & Payne, 2009; Mitchell, 2008a). Nonetheless, unlike school teachers or lecturers, the
language used for those working in teaching and training roles reflects the disparate environments and a lack of singular professional identity (Grace, 2005).

Conclusion

‘Incongruity drives change’ asserts Lumby (2009, p. 6) and VET practitioners are faced with substantial incongruity as they negotiate a sense of professional identity within a risk sensitive and compliance driven educational environment. This chapter has examined links between compliance systems and VET practitioner identity in addressing the ways in which risk is reflected in compliance systems. While power and inequity have been demonstrated as forces underpinning compliance systems, Beck’s (1992, 2000b, 2009a) risk theory provides a conceptual framework in which to align these forces. Notwithstanding the normative processes that occur within performative environments, VET practitioners have the capacity in many instances to use compliance systems as positive frameworks. This occurs in learning content and assessment debate, professional development, and quality improvements and as a means to facilitate learning pathways for students.

Clearly, the increasing workload and unfunded tasks that VET practitioners are called upon to undertake increase anxiety and may simply be impossible to maintain long term. The individualisation and casualisation of the workforce in VET environments reflect Beck’s (1992, 2000b, 2009a) risk society analysis, and his analysis of the forces of globalisation. This environment reflects the cascading effects of a world in which risk has become a primary exchange.
In addressing the second question posed at the beginning of the chapter, ‘What impact do compliance systems have on VET practitioner identity?’ Goffman’s (1959) metaphor of performance has explanatory application for VET practitioner identity. On the one hand, compliance systems can promote a performative environment where the possibilities of making autonomous determinations about how to perform are diminished and failing to conform to the ‘performative texts’ meets with disapproval (Ball, 2003a, p.11).

It is evident that VET practitioners occupy a highly contested educational space and as such are exposed, as are many educators and teachers, to challenges in maintaining their sense of professional judgement and identity (Davids, 2008; Mitchell, 2008a; Mitchell & McKenna, 2006). Goffman’s metaphor of performance allows VET practitioners and researchers to critique and examine the underlying risk amelioration strategies that impact upon their professional practice. In this way the claim that the compliance driven performative environment not only changes what we do but ‘who we are’ carries with it the potential for positive change and professional growth.

Developing a methodology to investigate compliance and VET practitioner identity is the task of chapter four, in which the deliberate choice of ‘Grounded Theory’ as a methodology and theoretical approach to this research will be outlined.
CHAPTER FOUR: Research design, methodology and methods

Introduction

In the introductory chapter of this thesis an overview of the VET sector, policy approaches taken to VET by Federal and Victorian Governments and the role of various stakeholders such as industry skills councils was provided. Chapter two explored the sociological theme of risk theory as one way of understanding the forces operating in the globalised society of the 21st century and the complex impact these forces ultimately have in the VET sector and on the organisation. Chapter three discussed some of the ramifications of risk on practitioners through increasing compliance systems and risk mitigation strategies as the sector and the organisation respond to a risky and marketised education environment.

This chapter is the intersection point that links the theoretical context of this research to the findings and provides a basis for subsequent theory building. The following discussion outlines the rationale for selecting the methodology, research design, methods used, the place of literature in this research methodology and limitations.

Rationale for selecting a research methodology

The rationale for the selection of grounded theory as the methodology through which substantive theory building is provided in the following chapters. The aim of this research is to add to the body of knowledge in areas relating to VET practitioners’ everyday experience. The research was conducted within the context of a rapidly changing sector experiencing pressure from the macro forces of globalisation and risk. In particular, it takes a unique view of VET practitioner
experience through the lens of Beck’s (1992, 2009a) risk theory, moving away from some of the more usual standpoints taken to VET practitioner research that focus on teaching practices. As a consequence, this research looks for connections and theorises VET practitioner experience beyond their teaching practices and methods (Karmel, 2011). The research is focused on a broader understanding of the risk forces driving macro, meso and micro level systems and processes that impact practitioners.

A research methodology capable of providing a sound approach to achieve this stated aim needed to be selected from the plethora of methods available. Qualitative research approaches appeared particularly appropriate, given there is limited extant knowledge of this area of study, making a process of discovery necessary. Qualitative methodologies have particular utility when attempting to make sense of complex research environments, participant experiences and to construct theoretical understandings of the research findings (Morse & Richards, 2000).

Crotty (1998) describes four fundamental elements within social research: epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodology and methods. Following this schema to inform the research design enabled connections to be established between these elements that subsequently validated the choice of methodology. Thus, a number of possibilities for research methodologies were available by connecting an underlying epistemology of constructionism with the interpretivist theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. Remaining cognisant of these concepts, a research approach was required that could deliver the research aims.
As a consequence of these aims the final choice of grounded theory was made substantially due to its inductive approach and the ability it clearly had to enable VET practitioners’ voices to be heard. It also provided scope for the everyday experiences of practitioners to be connected and examined within the complex macro, meso and micro environments, in which they practice, through the process of constant data comparison. This presented the potential for rich data emerged through the grounded theory approach and it facilitated dynamic interactions with individual VET practitioners (Milliken & Schreiber, 2011; Charmaz, 2006).

Clearly researchers choose methodologies to suit their particular research environment and needs (Parahoo, 2009; Charmaz, 2006). The salient issue is that research epistemology; methodology and methods are identified and demonstrated to be consistent with the purpose and aims of the research (Carter & Little, 2007). This research may have equally been conducted using other qualitative methodologies such as phenomenology, ethnography, hermeneutics and narrative to mention a fraction of those available (Crotty, 1998; Higgs, 2001; Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2010; Babbie, 2011). Nonetheless, grounded theory offered an approach that proved workable and rewarding.

**What is grounded theory?**

A defining and appealing feature of grounded theory is that it does not test a hypothesis. It sets out to find theory that accounts for the research situation implicit in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It is therefore, primarily an inductive rather than deductive process. In other words, grounded theory, unlike descriptive and exploratory studies, aims to ‘explain’ rather than ‘describe’ and
explore phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2010). It is sometimes also
called the method of ‘constant comparison’ for the way that data is compared to
allow categories to emerge and theory built (Babbie, 2011, Corbin & Strauss,
2008).

Despite some differences in approaches to grounded theory a number of essential
elements are necessary for a theory to be considered grounded; these have been
followed in this research. The key elements of the approach developed originally
by Glaser and Strauss (Birks & Mills, 2011) can be summarised as:

• simultaneous data collection and analysis;

• coding and developing categories from data;

• constant comparison of data to develop theory building;

• theory development throughout the data collection and analysis
  process;

• memoing to establish theoretical categories and their relationships;
  and,

• sampling to promote theory generation.

In grounded theory, it is the level of explanation of the data that distinguishes it
from other qualitative methods. Coding is not simply part of data analysis; it is the
‘fundamental analytic process used by the researcher’ (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p.
12). ‘It is what transports researchers and their data from transcript to theory’
(Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 549). Therefore, grounded theory requires adherence
to coding procedures to maintain the validity and reliability of the data analysis
(Babbie, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Crotty, 1998; Lichtman, 2010).
A foremost element transporting data to theory, within this methodology, is a process known as ‘saturation’ of the data (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Saturation is usually defined as a point at which no new data emerges. While this definition is useful, reaching saturation is fundamentally more complex. It is achieved through the combination of the data collection process, analysis and data comparison that leads to theoretical sensitivity and subsequently to concept development (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2008). A circular process of comparison and analysis continues until the ‘concepts are well defined and explained’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 145). It is this process that delivers density to the concepts to the point of ‘saturation’ and, therefore, completeness and validity of the concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 155). Glaser and Strauss (1967) identified saturation as a key validating process within grounded theory that occurs when similarities in data appear repeatedly (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Careful attention to the saturation of data enables the researcher to fully develop the connections between data collection, analysis and theory development (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The methodology satisfied the quest to obtain an in-depth understanding of practitioners’ experiences by moving beyond descriptive thematic analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011; Creswell, 2009). As Glaser (2003) noted:

> Conceptualisation is not an act of interpretation; it is an act of abstraction. This abstraction to a conceptual level theoretically explains rather than describes behaviour that occurs conceptually and generally in many diverse groups with a same concern. Abstraction thereby frees the researcher from qualitative research’s concerns with accuracy and interpretation of multiple perspectives by putting the focus on concepts (p. 117).
Historical context of grounded theory

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, a precursor to significant developments within qualitative research. The approach emerged from research on dying patients and was considered by its authors to be discovered, not invented (Babbie, 2011). Glaser and Strauss’ work helped spark the 1970s reaction against ‘Grand Theory’ and heralded an attempt to bridge the gap between abstraction and empiricism (Moriarty, 2011; Day, 1999; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Denzin’s, *The Research Act* (1970) during this time represented further efforts to counter the dominance of quantitative methods, particularly after the technical developments in early computing and scientific technologies where large data sets could be analysed (Moriarty, 2011). Over time, differences developed between the approaches taken by Glaser and Strauss on epistemological and methodological grounds (Rattray, 2006; Charmaz, 2006).

Corbin and Strauss (2008) have an emphasis on the significance of processes that support the verification of data in ways that Glaser (1992) does not (Rattray, 2006). Glaser (1992) expressed concern that Corbin and Strauss’ approach amounted to forcing the data. Much discussion has occurred in relation to these approaches, however, this research is informed by principles of emergent qualitative research that is inherent in Glaser’s (1992) approach and the data analysis procedures informed by Corbin and Strauss (1990, 2008). Nonetheless, Charmaz’s (2006) advice to avoid totally prescriptive approaches is acknowledged.
Grounded theory continues to develop and a second generation of theorists have extended the work of Glaser and Strauss. Morse et al. (2009), furthering the original ideas of Glaser and Strauss, Clarke (2005), developed situational analysis and Charmaz (2006) has pioneered constructivist grounded theory. Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) acknowledges the work of Clarke and Charmaz, whom she asserts have taken up Denzin’s challenge to move ‘more deeply into the regions of postmodern sensibility’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 9). Nonetheless, Birks & Mill (2011) point out that the first generation of grounded theorists were focused on methods. It was not until Corbin’s (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) explanation of the influence of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism that the philosophies underpinning first generation grounded theory were articulated. Milliken and Schreiber (2012, p. 686), highlight the complex nature of social phenomena and the ways in which symbolic interactionism helps focus the researcher, ‘beyond pre-established understandings’ and sensitise the research to interactions and meanings within the data. Milliken and Schreiber (2012, p. 686) explain that, ‘locating the research methodology within symbolic interactionism provides a means for investigation not only the social world but also the contextualized processes by which human beings construct and engage with their social worlds’.

Although Milliken and Schreiber (2012, p. 686) proceed to point out that symbolic interactionism’s implicit presence in grounded theory research ‘does not preclude overlap with other theoretical and philosophical perspectives, such as postmodernism, feminism, or critical race theory’. Undoubtedly, methodological gaps and silences in first generation grounded theory have proved a catalyst for
further iterations and approaches. Nonetheless, these developments still preserve the methods within research design that are essential in order to claim research findings have been developed from grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005).

Acknowledging a standpoint

VET practitioners provide a significant service to individuals, the community and the nation through workforce capacity building and individual skill development (AWPA, 2013). Developing a skilled workforce that is responsive to current and future needs in an obdurately unstable global economic environment is increasingly fraught with risk and complexity (Bretherton, 2011; Cully, et al., 2009; Mitchell & Ward, 2010). VET practitioners do not operate in isolation from the global forces of a rapidly changing world. As with the society in which they live, VET practitioners must deal with the processes of risk, reflexive modernisation and individualisation (Beck, 1992, 2009a; Giddens, 1990, 1999). Limited research has been conducted to investigate how these forces impact VET practitioners’ experience (Black & Reich, 2010). Consequently, multi-dimensional factors influencing VET practitioners’ management of risk and compliance systems are not well understood and the extent of their impact is unclear.

The daily experiences of VET practitioners are both complex and interwoven with many dimensions of meaning overlapping and interconnecting with social and structural influences. Extracting meaning through analysis of VET practitioner experiences is premised on the notion that experience is subjectively inscribed
In addition, as symbolic interactionism demonstrates, a myriad of social constraints and interactions operate within human interactions (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). The unique construction of meaning in this research draws on the interconnections of practitioners’ experiences to generate meaning, as ‘the basic generation of meaning is always social, for the meanings with which we are endowed arise in and out of interactive human community’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 55).

Unsurprisingly, VET practitioners bring with them particular standpoints that develop from meaning-making within the context that is particular to their setting within a dual sector organisation. Acknowledging this standpoint enables a privileging of individuals, their experiences and voice (Smith, D., 2005). The underpinning notions of standpoint theory have been historically focused on the issues or problems of the marginalised with beginnings that can be traced from Hegel’s master/servant relationship, Marx’s class and economic readings, and more recently, ‘feminist standpoint theory’ (Harding, 1986, p. 141). A resonance exists with standpoint theory through VET practitioners’ marginalisation by the formidable demands of global economic movements, government policy and industry (Cully, et al., 2009; Kells, 2013). Sensitivity to the standpoint of VET practitioners and the ways in which they made meaning of their experiences was fundamental to the conduct of this research.

A note of caution is provided through critiques of standpoint approaches that point to the risk of creating a single standpoint that captures knowledge and experience as an indistinguishable whole (Ryan, 2005). Noting that caution, such
essentialism can be countered by the acknowledgment of a commonality of experiences rather than a homogeneous VET practitioner experience. Dorothy Smith (1987) defined the idea as ‘what one knows is affected by where one stands (one’s subject position) in society’. The corollary is that each person’s subject position may still vary by a range of degrees (Ryan, 2005; Smith, D., 2005). While the diversity inherent in standpoint theory is conceded, it does not preclude a commonality of experiences that had utility in this research (Smith, D., 2005).

**The place of literature**

Parahoo’s (2009) claim that the use of the literature can promote a tendency to rely on material that confirms, rather than challenges theory construction, is germane to this research. An examination of risk related literature has taken place both preceding and during the completion of the 12 interviews that comprise the field based data. Parahoo’s (2009) caution is particularly relevant for inductively oriented research such as this. Herein lies a longstanding debate within grounded theory approaches to methodology. Dunne (2011, p. 113) identified the review of literature in grounded theory as the ‘chicken and egg’ debate. It is not that literature should not be reviewed but rather the point of contention is ‘when’ it should be reviewed.

Literature reviewed in this research was intended to develop a broad understanding of issues that impact the environment in which VET practitioners operate. There are two salient points to be made about the literature review in this thesis. The first, in deference to Glaser’s (1967) view that in a grounded theory based study it is not necessarily possible to know at the beginning which literature
will later turn out to be relevant. Thus, an early literature review may prove to be inefficient and wasteful in terms of time and effort. The most significant objection, however, to early literature reviews, is in terms of the ability of the data to emerge ‘naturally from the empirical data during analysis, uninhibited by extant theoretical frameworks and associated hypotheses’ (Dunne, 2011, p. 114). Implications for early literature review in grounded theory research are concerned with ‘forcing’ the data and as a consequence compromising the integrity of theory building (Birks & Mills, 2011).

The second point to be made is that the use of literature in the methodology can be a comparative and analytical process in concert with the emerging data (Dunne, 2011). Literature is consequently not given a position of privilege and becomes data that must undergo the processes of analysis and comparison (Charmaz, 2006, Birks & Mills, 2011). In short, the accessing and review of the relevant literature becomes part of the data collection process to be compared and analysed with other research data. In this way the literature can be subjected to the same scrutiny of comparison and analysis as the data collected from VET practitioners, to establish its utility for theory building. As Charmaz (2006, p. 166) suggests this is congruent with grounded theory that requires ‘extant concepts to earn their way into your narrative’.

According to Dunne (2011) there is both a move and a need to create a middle way through this longstanding debate:

…there now appears to be a growing consensus that some middle ground must be reached – a position which acknowledges the original ethos of grounded theory and the genuine concerns about the imposition of external frameworks, yet simultaneously recognises the
often practical need for, and potential advantages of, engaging with existing literature in the substantive area at an early stage (p. 117).

The use of literature in this research reflects a middle ground that holds both sides of the debate in tension. Adopting a middle ground to the unique focus of this research allowed a useful dynamic interplay to develop between the data generated from field research and that generated through literature review. This process produced new concepts and ideas that distilled the key concepts that enabled theorising to take place (Payne, 2007).

**Outlining the research design**

Methodology is a ‘strategy, plan of action, process of design’ that underpins a set of methods and links them to the epistemological view of the research (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). It is more than a collection of methods and outlines the processes of the design strategy. While methods align with the strategy they need to be differentiated as the procedures, tasks and techniques used to gather and analyse data. These included, interviews, observation, questionnaires and document analysis. Frequently methods are outlined as a methodology, which renders them incomplete and unable to provide evidence of the soundness of the research approach and activities (Crotty, 1998). The methodology used in this research is informed by a design process intent on constructing a core category from the research that makes sense of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory provided a research strategy with a methodology that comprised specific processes leading to systematic activities (Birks & Mills, 2011). The methodology’s inductive approach to theory building was then able to facilitate the development of unifying concepts to explain VET practitioners’ experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
A single organisational setting was chosen for this research to provide a consistent context from which to view VET practitioners’ experiences. This provided common organisational processes and systems against which to compare and investigate the risk forces VET practitioners’ experience. The research was conducted with VET practitioners from a Victorian dual sector educational organisation at a number of its campus locations.

A practitioner cohort of 12 was chosen, as the purpose of the study was to understand practitioner experiences at the conceptual and abstracted level rather than conducting a large-scale thematic survey. The rich data produced from semi-structured interviews yielded a great deal of information that was then analysed using grounded theory methods to produce concepts that had explanatory power for the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The subsequent development of theory required sensitivity to the ways in which political and economic culture and reflexive praxis intersect with VET practitioner experience. Consistent with this observation, the influence of standpoint theory is acknowledged and, therefore, epistemological consideration was given to VET practitioners’ viewpoints and subject positions (Harding, 1987; Smith 2005). Correspondingly, respect for the knowledge, experience and agency of individual participants formed the basis of this methodological approach when conducting interviews with practitioners.

**VET practitioner participants**

Participants were drawn from across the subject areas of the organisation’s TAFE. The cohort of 12 practitioners was drawn from a range of VET subject areas and years of experience and identified by purposive sampling using the
snowball method. The snowball method is a sampling technique that was used to identify knowledge and resources within the organisation. Snowball sampling was used to obtain recommendations from VET practitioners to identify the most suitable practitioners to approach to take part in this research. It assisted in finding practitioners with a range of skills, positions and experience within the organisation. It was particularly useful in identifying a diverse range of key practitioners (Lichtman, 2010; Bouma & Ling, 2004).

Of the 12 practitioners, two were men and 10 were women. Participants were all current VET practitioners with teaching roles, although three had roles that also included management components, and other VET practitioner supervision. Four of the practitioners participating in this research had ongoing full time employment, another four had full time contracts with limited terms (mostly two years) and four practitioners had sessional or casual positions, reflecting the diverse nature of workforce employment practices. Practitioners taught in a range of subject areas including one in Information Technology Services (ITS), three in management and administration, two in human resources management, two in foundational studies and two in VET teacher training. They worked within classroom environments and industry settings, using methods of teaching delivery that included face-to-face, on-line, work place observation, in workplace learning and blended strategies. Practitioners used a variety of assessment practices from RPL, workplace observation, project based and in class assessments. In addition, the casual VET practitioners were also working at other institutions and private RTOs concurrently.
Movement within the sector across a number of teaching areas and functions, public and private RTOs is a common trend noted in previous VET research (Smith & Keating, 2003; Grace, 2008). All but two of the VET practitioners reported working for other VET providers at some stage in their careers. The two practitioners who had joined the organisation from industry and had both held learning and workforce development roles. Six of the practitioners had current engagement with industry programs and two other practitioners had recently come from industry. Industry currency is required so that practitioners can remain aware of the developments and issues within their areas of subject matter expertise. Practitioners included two in their early thirties and the rest well into their middle years. This reflects the Australian Workplace and Productivity Agency’s (AWPA, 2012) concern with the ‘ageing workforce’ in VET that has been the subject of concern in other VET reviews, and for VET providers in attracting the next generation of staff who can maintain the high levels of industry currency required (DEECD, 2013; Productivity Commission, 2011). The Agency (AWPA, 2012, p. 83) characterised the Australian VET workforce as:

- having a predominance of dual professionals, with both vocational and educational skills.
- being older than the wider labour force, as most VET workers gain industry experience before joining the sector later in their working life.
- having high rates of non-permanent employment, compared to the general workforce.
- being highly mobile, with over 80 per cent changing jobs within the sector during their career.
The choice of these particular participants was made to ensure that a sufficiently diverse group was obtained, with a range of teaching subject areas, employment contract arrangements and VET experience. The purposive sampling of this group of practitioners meant that they could comment on their unique experiences in a dual sector TAFE. They were also able to compare experiences of compliance systems between a dual sector organisation and stand-alone TAFE and private RTOs.

**Ethical considerations**

A key part of this research was eliciting responses from VET practitioners within the organisation in ways that allowed them to contribute unreservedly during data collection interviews. To achieve this outcome it was necessary to conduct the data collection in a careful manner that was respectful to VET practitioners and protected their identities. There are a number of ethical issues associated with conducting research in workplaces given that matters of confidentiality and anonymity are sometimes difficult to ensure (Brookes, te Riele & Maguire, 2014). It is for these reasons that no other identifying descriptors for VET practitioners have been provided and that this was discussed with participants. In addition, on review of their interview they were also able to request material be removed that they felt compromised their identity. No practitioner elected to remove any material.

As part of this careful approach a Plain Language Statement (PLS) was developed that outlined the purpose of the research and the nature of the request for data collection from VET practitioners. A consent form outlining the nature of the
consent sought and complaints processes were also developed for the research. Within these documents the rights of participants to withdraw at any time without consequence was explained. Practitioners were made aware in the statements that the information would be treated confidentially and stored securely in line with Deakin University’s procedures and that their information would be de-identified. Approval to proceed with the research was granted by the Deakin Research Ethics Committee on 16 March 2010 (Project reference number: HEAG (AE) 10-06).

In addition, as the research was to take place with VET practitioners employed in a dual sector organisation consent was sought and received from the organisation. The same process of PLS and consent form development was undertaken to provide the organisation with clarity about the request to undertake research with the VET practitioners. The organisation was supportive of the research concept and after some discussion to establish the ways in which the organisation would be protected, consent was granted.

**Study limitations**

As with all research there are factors that limit the scope of research, for example, the research focused on one element of the VET sector, in Victoria. The focus of the research was further narrowed by exclusively locating it within one dual sector educational organisation. While the VET sector in Australia has a widespread and diverse workforce, data collected for this research was from 12 practitioners, which is a small although adequate sample (Adler & Adler, 1987; Flick 2008, 2011; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Clearly, this makes research practical; although it cannot be taken as universal.
The prior knowledge gained as a former insider was both a strength and a limitation. Previous exposure to the dual sector environment enabled rapport to be built with practitioners that facilitated, to some degree, their very frank responses. Some aspects of working in the sector were quickly understood so that the interviews might move quickly to the concerns practitioners had without having to explain the minutiae of VET practitioner practice. This same prior knowledge created the potential for bias or blindness through having an established standpoint and view of VET practice. Whilst this was a potential problem the diversity of the sample across a number of different discipline areas and campus locations created situations in which prior knowledge was limited.

The research was conducted over a specific period of time and as such provides a snapshot limited to that time period. In a rapidly changing VET environment that is in a constant state of change, VET policies that were current when this point in time research was completed may have changed. However, the relationship between VET practitioners and the impact of global risk forces will continue to remain relevant. Research such as this can only ever be partial, incomplete and understood as a product of the context, subjectivity and limitations within which it was constructed (Babbie, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Birks & Mills, 2011; Cresswell, 2009). The findings that follow this chapter are offered with these limitations.

**Methods**

The methods associated with grounded theory are very briefly outlined in the following section of this chapter. Key processes, procedures and assumptions have been elucidated in order to support the aim of the research and subsequent
research findings in the chapters that follow. Nonetheless, the space available
does not allow for an exhaustive analysis of the merits or limitations of these
methods.

The original model developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and further refined
by Corbin and Strauss (2008) inform the methods used in this research. These
include key processes and procedures such as theoretical sampling, constant
comparative analysis, data saturation, coding, memoing and theory building.

**Data collection**

Semi-structured interviews formed the primary method of data collected in this
research. The semi-structured approach to interviews proved compatible with the
in-depth or ‘intensive’ data collection aims of this research (Charmaz, 2006, p.
25). To facilitate in-depth interviewing, rapport building began at the initial
contact stage when participants agreed to the interview process. An initial
discussion about the research was conducted with participants that assisted in
developing a mutually respectful relationship and commonality of interest in the
VET sector. The researcher-participant relationship was further developed during
the interviews through engaging in a relaxed and informal environment using a
conversational style, confirming the use and purpose of the research and re-
iterating the de-identified nature of participant comments (Reihharz, 1992;
Charmaz, 2006). As a former VET insider interviewees demonstrated a level of
trust and confidence in the research relationship quite quickly. In fact,
participants were very keen to discuss their experiences and engaged in wide
ranging and very frank conversations. The research questions (*see Appendix B*)
informed the conversation; at the same time allowed for participant driven
direction in the interviews as Reinharz (1992) suggests. Although the semi-
structured format used does ‘not mean that a researcher has no influence over the
course of an interview’ the format provided participants with the scope to focus
the conversation on areas of importance in their particular experience (Corbin &
Strauss, 2008, p. 28).

The interviews lasted between one and a half to two hours and were conducted
face-to-face with participants consenting to the recording of their interviews.
Follow up interviews were conducted where further information and clarity was
required to ensure the data had reached saturation point (Corbin & Strauss, 2008;
Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews were subsequently transcribed and made
available to participants to check for accuracy.

In this research the initial theoretical sampling began at the early stages of the
cycle of data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Theoretical sampling in
grounded theory is sampling or selecting of participants based on the concepts
emerging from the data. Therefore, as data collection commenced and developed
VET practitioners were selected in response to the questions and issues arising
from the data. In this way, emerging concepts continued to direct further data
collection in a specifically targeted manner that is atypical in most qualitative
methodologies (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Babbie, 2011).
Theoretical sampling promoted data collection that was ‘controlled and directed
to relevance and workability’ (Glaser, 1978, p. 47). It provided a manageable
strategy to drive the constant comparative analysis of the data. As a consequence,
the need to saturate categories with further data became evident in ways that may not have occurred in other forms of qualitative descriptive analysis. Charmaz (2006, p. 108) highlights the ‘emergent’ nature of theoretical sampling that shapes ideas and the purpose of the sampling through the practice of memoing. Therefore, the practice of memoing commenced early in this research and assisted in defining and refining the data.

Analysis and interpretation of the data

The process of concurrent data collection and analysis differentiates grounded theory methodology from other research methodologies (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Most other research methodologies either collect all the data and then code the complete data set or develop a theory and then collect data to test that theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). That is not to say that other methodologies do not make comparative analysis. However, it was the constant nature of this comparative practice that gave this research its inductive theory building capacity (Walker & Mynirk, 2006; Babbie, 2011). The use of constant comparative analysis as a technique to compare and contrast the data, codes and categories produced the critical refinement of categories (Birks & Mills, 2011; Stanley, 2006). Analysis and data collection became a symbiotic process, driving one another by analysing and continually testing the new insights revealed by the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Open coding

The first step in developing the analysis of the data involved ‘breaking the data apart and delineating concepts’ which occurred through the identifying, labelling
and categorising of phenomena found initially in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195). This process of ‘open coding’ used words and phrases from the initial data transcripts to label and group the data into categories containing related codes. The codes developed were suggested by the data, however, that is not to say other researchers may have identified different codes given the ultimately subjective nature of the data analysis process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006).

Following this procedure produced a sizable amount of data, which was subsequently labelled into broad descriptive categories, including; workplace practices and audit requirements. Nonetheless, the process of open coding was fundamentally simple, pulling the data apart in order to label it and form simple categories (Birk & Mills, 2011).

**Memoing**

Memoing occurred concurrently with the processes of data collection and theory development. It added insight and structure to the development of concepts throughout the analysis and provided a mechanism through which to capture ideas and questions (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Memoing is described by Clarke (2005, p. 85) as, ‘intellectual capital in the bank’ and an initial and ongoing activity in grounded theory as they capture the journey of theory making (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Much has been written about the salience and utility of memoing and the variety of approaches that can be taken to their production (Clarke, 2005; Charmaz, 2006). In this part time research project it was extremely helpful to have a repository to return to that captured and preserved
concepts and the progression of ideas to support the continuing momentum of the analysis.

Axial coding

After pulling the data apart in the process of open coding it may seem counter intuitive to then put the data ‘back together’. However, axial coding is a way of ‘crosscutting or relating concepts to each other’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195). It puts data back together in ‘new ways by making connections between a category and its sub-categories’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 97). At this stage of analysis labelled categories converged around common axes, refining the patterns and themes that emerged from the previously broad data categories. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) predicted, sub-categories frequently emerged simultaneously as open codes developed, confirming that coding is not a rigidly linear process.

The paradigm outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 89) provided a methodical approach to the analytical process of axial coding. The paradigm consists of three components that answer critical questions:

1. **Conditions**—the circumstances and/or conditions that form the structure of the phenomena. These address the ‘why’, ‘where’, ‘how come’ and ‘when’.

2. **Interactions/actions/emotions**—responses made by individuals or groups to specific situations. These are the ‘by whom’ and ‘how’ questions.
3. **Consequences/outcomes of interactions**—consequences provide a response to the interactions and/or emotions of the interaction/action and emotions above. This component address the ‘what happens’ question.

In addition, the Conditional/Consequential Matrix was used to enhance analysis of the relationships between ‘conditions and consequences’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 94). Most particularly for the capacity it provided to expose the interplay between macro, meso and micro conditions and the subsequent impact these have on VET practitioners as individuals and/or as a group. Clear synergies developed using this matrix with risk theory data from the literature review confirming the appropriateness of a grounded theory approach to this research. Axial coding was a rewarding and challenging point of departure with previous thematic research experiences.

**Selective coding**

Advanced or selective coding provided the basis for theoretical integration. Selective coding is a process that uses the most significant codes to sift through the large volume of data collected examining their dimensions and properties to reach a central or core category (Charmaz, 2006). As the central or core category emerged others came into focus and could be aligned with the core category (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Within this research ‘Commitments’ became an initial core category. These commitments included:

- Community building
- Student outcomes
Repeated attempts using the storyline technique as a vehicle for integrating categories and concepts resulted in these key concepts developing. Some debate has occurred in relation to the use of storyline by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Nonetheless, Birks and Mills (2011) insist that story telling has much greater potential in grounded theory than is currently recognised. In addition, Charmaz’s (2006, p. 117) advice that diagrams can offer ‘concrete images of our ideas’ helped to encapsulate the main findings in a visual manner. This process enabled successively more abstract diagrams to integrate the categories into explanatory ideas and theories. In producing diagrams and storylines constant referral to the data was required to ensure a robust and in-depth understanding of the theoretical integration that was beginning to occur (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006). The utility and effectiveness of these techniques are clearly subject to personal preference and may not be useful for other researchers.

**Theoretical sensitivity**

Theoretical sensitivity has been a foundational aspect of grounded theory from the first seminal text of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Theoretical sensitivity reflects the
history and insight brought to grounded theory research by the researcher. This is a skill that develops, or should develop, through the immersion of the researcher in the data according to Charmaz (2006). Thus ‘theoretical sensitivity’ grows with ‘exposure to data’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 230). Theoretical sensitivity is an essential capacity for grounded theory researchers as Corbin and Strauss (1990) explain:

Theoretical sensitivity refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that, which isn't. All this is done in conceptual rather than concrete terms. It is theoretical sensitivity that allows one to develop a theory that is grounded, conceptually dense, and well integrated—and to do this more quickly than if this sensitivity were lacking (p. 42).

Life experiences and previously established professional practices, particularly in reflexive journaling/memoing, sharpened theoretical sensitivity during this process of exposure to data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In addition, seeking feedback from participants and guidance from an experienced supervisor helped develop a high level of theoretical sensitivity. This proved necessary for the ensuing conceptual development in the findings outlined in subsequent chapters.

**Theoretical integration**

The final stage of theorising required attention to the integration of the concepts developed from the data. Clearly, this process began concurrently with selective coding procedures as significant codes emerged. While grounded theory is a fundamentally inductive process the processes of deduction were not totally absent. An oscillation between these modes of reasoning, ‘abductive reasoning’, occurred when concepts suggested by the data were tested until the concepts
arrived at seemed the most salient and plausible (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, as Thornberg (2012) outlines:

… by abduction, the researcher goes beyond data as well as the pre-existing theory or theories. It is an innovative process because every new insight is a result of modifying and elaborating prior knowledge or putting old ideas together in new ways as the researcher explores and tries to explain the new data (p. 247).

Developing integrated and abstract theory required continuing application to the task of developing self-insight and understanding of methodological and philosophical preferences (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 63).

The task of understanding philosophical preferences was of particular concern in relation to long standing views that early exposure to extant literature may impose existing ‘theoretical frameworks and associated hypotheses’ (Dunne, 2011, p. 114). To counter this risk the fundamental premise of grounded theory, of comparing the data, was used throughout theory development, which meant comparing the data to the developing theory and asking whether it was explanatory. Despite the complexities inherent in grounded theory and data analysis in general Charmaz (2006, p. 135) sums up the balance that needs to be achieved when theorising; ‘When you theorize, you reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions and probe into experience’.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a rationale for the choice of grounded theory as the methodological approach for this research. The choice of grounded theory was premised on its capacity to privilege practitioners’ voices through an inductive
approach to theory development (Charmaz, 2006; Babbie, 2011, Crotty, 1998). There are of course many qualitative methodologies that may have been applied to this research. However, grounded theory provided congruence with the aims of this research.

Grounded theory proved appropriate for the purpose of this research to explore VET practitioners’ everyday experiences within a rapidly changing VET sector. Given the increasing pressure that the education sector and VET in particular is subjected to, the intention of this research was to understand some of the impact and the flow-on effects of macro forces through the organisation and onto the practice of VET practitioners. The research design provided a structure for the study and a context for data collection processes that included participant selection, interviews, transcribing interviews, memo writing and diagramming to the point of saturation of the data. Analysis of the data was conducted using the grounded theory methods outlined in this chapter including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. From these processes it was possible to develop the theoretical approaches of the following chapters.
CHAPTER FIVE: Crisis of obligation and the point of TAFE

Introduction
This chapter begins an exploration of the responses of VET practitioners to the fundamental place and purpose of TAFE in the education sector. It scrutinises the unique community obligations so often associated with the TAFE sector and the ways in which respondents in this research understand them, from within a dual sector organisation. The chapter explores the unique place of TAFE within the VET sector and the community, the challenges TAFE confronts within the sector and issues that operating in a dual sector organisation present for VET practitioners.

Consistent with the structure of this thesis in conceptualising the macro, meso and micro levels of risk impact, findings in this chapter will address the intersection and impact of macro level risk on the role of VET practitioners. Subsequent chapters will examine the research findings at the meso level (chapter six) and the micro level (chapters seven and eight).

Unique place of TAFE
A consistent theme expressed by VET practitioners interviewed for this research related to the value of TAFE as an institution. There was a strong belief that TAFE occupied a very unique place in the wider community and was a vital component of Australia’s future workforce development. VET practitioners expressed particular concern for workforce development as a result of the substantial cuts to TAFE funding in Victoria of more than $300 million in the last
few years (AEU, 2013). They described the problem as a major risk to the workforce and community as a whole:

With the cuts we have it is risking that we will be left with an uneducated workforce or unskilled workforce and might not have people in the right jobs. (VET practitioner)

Another said:

The major risk for the VET sector and probably overall—the community—is a skills shortage because I can't see that private RTOs are going to be taking on a lot of things that are taught at TAFE. From my observation they are taking the things that are easy to take, that make money quickly. (VET practitioner)

Analysing the conflicting obligations that practitioners identified through the lens of Beck’s (1992, 2000b, 2009a) understanding of risk exposes a reflexive process that has become increasingly symbiotic. VET practitioners demonstrated an acute awareness of the symbiotic nature of growing risk as workforce skill requirements are escalating. This has happened at the exact moment when the investment in TAFE to develop these skills has diminished (DEECD, 2013).

TAFE’s role was understood by VET practitioners to be one of more than just providing a qualification:

I sense though that things like having to have—an outcome—that is that the student gets the qual and moves into employment or further study. Having that as the one and only outcome I think is sad. There are a whole raft of other reasons why students will enrol in TAFE and come. We are not seeing those as part of the outcomes. (VET practitioner)

While VET practitioners challenged current outcome measures, they also lamented the focus on macro risk that resulted in a loss of valuing of individual
courses and their specific role as first steps into education for some student cohorts. The long term value that came from a foundational course was not recognised in a system that focused on short term viability:

It is not about the viability of what is being delivered on a global scale! It’s the Cert. IV in Aged Care, Disability, and Cert. I in Vocational Prep etc. and their value. These are lost in the scheme of things. Students in these courses require a lot of extra support but it can change their life. (VET practitioner)

Implicit community service obligations that go beyond the standard delivery of courses informed VET practitioners’ sense of vocation and personal commitment to support disadvantaged cohorts, at risk students and young people. This confluence of purpose was challenged by the TAFE Reform Panel (cf. DEECD, 2013, p. 6), ‘TAFE institutes should no longer assume that they are required to deliver community service obligations that are not explicitly required and funded by government’. Although the Reform Panel (p. 46) points out their concern that ‘there will be a higher cost to society and other government-funded services if young people at higher risk of disengagement are not engaged in vocational training’.

The overwhelming understanding of TAFE’s unique purpose went beyond that of course delivery for VET practitioners to broader questions of social obligation within the community. Practitioners identified the particular and unique place of TAFE as a vehicle to overcome disadvantage and promote social justice regardless of whether these community obligations were explicit or not within the discourse around the role of TAFE or part of its contractual arrangements. Research by Buddlemeyer, Leung and Scutella (2012) confirms that individuals with qualifications up to Certificate III level experience the greatest gains in
measures of multi-dimensional social inclusion. Developing greater capacity in the workforce continues to be an essential element for countries competing successfully at the global level.

Dislocation, disconnection and alienation, with the purpose of TAFE within current financial models presented a substantial risk to VET practitioners’ sense of purpose. One practitioner described this as, ‘TAFE not knowing what it is funded for’ (VET practitioner). This underlying crisis of obligation is reflected further in the sector, for example, in the research report, *Skilled Migrant Women in Regional Australia: Promoting Social Inclusion through Vocational Education and Training* (Webb, Beale & Faine, 2013). Recommendations in this report point to the capacity and obligation of the TAFE sector to provide more than just a training and credentialing function. There is an inherent premise that social inclusion obligations must be acquitted.

While Burns (2002) and Davids (2008) contend that a shift away from social and community obligations has already occurred, for the VET practitioners in this research the notion of the public good persists and is not yet satisfactorily resolved. This is not a new dilemma. In Blackmore and Sachs’ (2007, p. 35) findings in *Performing and reforming leaders*, VET practitioners lamented the way that TAFE’s community responsibility was ‘written in very small print’. VET practitioners in this research asserted their obligation to social and community outcomes:

Absolutely it’s the opportunity for people to come in and be part of education and training in a way that actually meets their needs. It is not a Uni and it is unique and about empowering people. If we don’t
actually value and acknowledge that, something is missing. It’s not all about the piece of paper at the end. (VET practitioner)

Two of the VET practitioners interviewed for this research completed counselling courses in response to their exposure to the social needs of their students. They identified their counselling training as a direct outcome of their sense of community obligation as VET practitioners to develop the potential of their students and support them holistically.

In the long term, the interplay of the macro risk environment with economically rationalist models within education expose VET practitioners to increasing risk, conflict and uncertainty about their professional role and identity (see for example, Harris, Simons & Clayton, 2005; Bretherton, 2011). One VET practitioner summed up this experience:

> It is just a very uncertain environment. It is hard to know how to have a good sense of who I am and how I fit, there is no stability. (VET practitioner)

Risk theory’s identification of the increasingly globalised nature of risk is echoed by these VET practitioners’ experience (see Beck, 1992, 2009a; Giddens, 1999). They identified points of shift and change over recent years as TAFE has evolved to meet global risk by moving from a student centred organisation to a compliance focus. Many of the changes that educational organisations have experienced recently are driven by increasingly financially focused organisational models (Marginson, 1997; Brown, 2011). VET practitioners experienced uncertainty and instability as the corollary of a more globally competitive and risk conscious education sector. They apportioned blame for the devaluing of TAFE’s
role, and by association that of the VET practitioner, to those global risk forces. These shifts created a sense of indignation for practitioners who believed TAFE was not viewed as positively in Australia as it should be. As one VET practitioner said:

Like they say in Germany they are a country of tradesmen and their apprenticeships are crucial, the TAFE sector is huge. We are obsessed with degrees, it is simplistic. Higher ed. doesn’t suit everyone. Kids going to do Uni don’t know why they are doing it. Is it just what they should do? The finishing of secondary school is not enough anymore, just a stepping-stone, and in Uni it may not be practical and they have no skills. They can’t come back to TAFE because of the eligibility. It will cost them 20 grand! (VET practitioner)

While education may be valued in different ways in European countries, particularly the vocational sectors, Billett (2013) points out that even in Germany, where vocational education traditionally has a higher profile, higher education still occupies a higher standing in the community. Nonetheless, the subjective view of this VET practitioner was that TAFE in Australia was not being valued sufficiently or used judiciously to develop a skilled workforce.

Quality workforce outcomes are required by both industry and government funding contracts. Increasingly these outcomes are not adequately supported and become harder to attain as the workforce ages (AWPA, 2012). On a practical level this means that salary levels do not easily attract recruits from highly paid commercial sectors to join the TAFE workforce, as this VET practitioner found:

It’s hard to get people to deliver some of the programs that have changed like the human resources industrial relations component, which for industry means that you need someone who has very high-level currency or they will look silly. Industry students will ask all sorts of questions and they can't be fooled if the teacher is not up to speed. They will pick it up. Now people with that level of expertise
are just not willing to come in and deliver a unit here and there. We only have one person with this level of expertise who is also a qualified VET teacher. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners felt a crisis of obligation through the incongruity of the demands made on the TAFE sector and the lack of support from governments to develop the capacity to meet them. One VET practitioner articulated this as a ‘tension with the market and what TAFE can deliver’ (VET practitioner). TAFE was unanimously seen to be at risk by these practitioners within the increasingly competitive macro/global educational environment. Some speculated about the long-term future of TAFE, suspicious that the government wanted to get rid of it and squeeze it out of existence. Recurring re-structures were seen as one way to do this according to one practitioner, who said:

Since the restructure my suspicion was that they were going to sit the TAFE out there on a limb and if it doesn't work they will just shed it off. I could be wrong but it is my suspicion. (VET practitioner)

Another said:

I think the organisation would love to get rid of TAFE but we do give them [higher education institutions] students and we have become a lot more focused on pathways and that does give an advantage. I just think they will wring everything out of us. (VET practitioner)

Another said:

I think you have to ask about the place of TAFE really with the funding cuts that are happening. I mean what is it there for? It’s being cut all over the place so you wonder what the future is. (VET practitioner)
The future of TAFE is integral to the recent policy reforms in higher education that set a goal of 40% of young people achieving an undergraduate bachelor’s qualification (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). This leaves 60% outside the higher education system, some of whom seek other education and employment pathways. Clearly, university education is not the pathway for all young people, which is why VET practitioners believe the place of TAFE, remains crucial in developing a skilled workforce (see Pardy, 2014, March 26).

The TAFE Reform Panel contends that, ‘the Government clearly has an interest in the future sustainability of TAFE Institutes. A more rigorous approach to defining institutional performance expectations and monitoring institutional performance as the owner, and facilitating the sharing of benchmark data will assist this’ (DEECD, 2013, p. 8). These comments presuppose support for TAFE to deliver the required performance, and clarity of purpose, neither of which are yet satisfactorily resolved in the view of these VET practitioners.

It is this fundamental lack of clarity of purpose for the TAFE sector that complicates VET practice. A lack of purpose and a crisis about obligation make it difficult for VET practitioners to reconcile their own place in the system and as a consequence to deal with the associated risks and challenges to their professional identity and well-being. These risks to individual practitioners are explored further in the following chapters.
Facing the challenges

TAFE’s crisis of obligation is compounded by risk associated with the ways in which expert knowledge operates. Risk theorists understand expert knowledge in different ways. Giddens’ (1991, 1999) appeal to trust in expert knowledge presumes confidence in systems that promote and produce expert knowledge. He theorises that those designated as experts and the systems that declare them expert are trusted (Giddens, 1991, 1999). However, these research findings support the premise that a complex set of diverse perspectives and suspicions undermine expert knowledge and lead to uncertainty. For this reason, Beck’s critique of expert knowledge built on distrust, through the process of reflexivity, has greater resonance for these practitioners who have lost trust and confidence in ‘experts’ (see Beck, 2009a; Griner, 2002).

The lack of clarity in the purpose of TAFE is compounded further for practitioners by a lack of confidence in the expert mechanisms that define the workforce skills and development activities that vocational practitioners are responsible for delivering. The role of Industry Skills Councils (ISC, 2014) are critical and involve:

- providing integrated industry intelligence and advice to the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, government and enterprises on workforce development and skills needs;
- actively supporting the development, implementation and continuous improvement of high quality training and workforce development products and services including Industry Training Packages;
• providing independent skills and training advice to enterprises, including matching identified training needs with appropriate training solutions; working with enterprises, employment service providers, Registered Training Organisations and government to allocate training places under the Enterprise Based Productivity Places Program; and,

• engaging with State and Territory Governments, State and Territory industry advisory bodies and peak representative bodies in their area of industry coverage.

However, VET practitioners felt distanced and outside the operation of such instrumentalities, as one practitioner said, ‘no-one asks me what I think about what students need to do the job’ (VET practitioner). Grace (2005b) concurs that traditionally VET practitioners are not well represented on governance bodies, such as skills councils, and this creates a level of cynicism from practitioners.

Commentators such as Frewer et al. (2003) identify distrust of the motives of industry and government as features of risk discourse. It may also be that the complexity of the disparate standpoints of those operating in the VET system and those attempting manage it create misunderstanding. Nonetheless, one VET practitioner summed up the lack of confidence this way:

It’s all about the influence of skills councils or business but who says they have a vision for the future anyway? They are only interested in the bottom line. (VET practitioner)
Employers and industry groups have not always been clear or uniform in their approach to workforce training needs (Misko & Halliday-Wynes, 2009). VET sector policy instrumentalities were seen to have their own myopic focus as this VET practitioner (see VET practitioner quote above) identified. The conflict is compounded by the heavy reliance on the role of VET practitioners to deliver training programs developed by a body that they distrust and believe have vested interests (see Moodie, 2012). The lack of trust resulted in one practitioner saying it was, ‘Like 1984, making a crisis to keep us on our toes’ (VET practitioner).

The climate created by this distrust can have consequences for organisations. Markus (2011) indicates that there are significant consequences for an organisation when distrust erodes individual connectedness with decision-making functions. There is potential for this to produce a chronic lack of confidence and cohesion within an organisation. VET practitioners in this research expressed a sense of disempowerment in the face of policy decisions and directions at the macro level, over which they had very little control.

A fundamental issue for these VET practitioners was the expertise and motives of those tasked with determining workforce needs that lead to determining funding levels. They questioned the direction TAFE has taken in Victoria particularly through recent funding cuts (Victorian Auditor General, 2014, 2015; Victorian VET Funding, 2015). VET practitioners identified significant risk in the changes to funding in the vocational sector under *Refocusing Vocational Training in Victoria*, (DEECD, 2012) the results of which emerged in earnest in 2013. These changes include moving to a fully contestable market where TAFE and private
RTOs compete on a more equal footing. Frustrated VET practitioners actually felt they had been put at a competitive disadvantage:

The TAFE sector is forced to go and make money in a different way to be more entrepreneurial and to put the fees up. Once you put the fees up you are not competitive. (VET practitioner)

Competitive neutrality principles have moved Victorian TAFE institutes into an environment that ‘removes constraints on TAFE institutes’ to ensure that they function effectively in the marketplace (DEECD, 2013, p. 6). As VET practitioners pointed out there are advantages and disadvantages resulting from these changes. Some TAFE institutions may have an advantage through their course mix with supplementary payments and loadings related to course bands. These scales range from the highest in Band A (including foundational skills and pathways) to the lowest in Band E (including arts and recreational). On the other hand, there are disadvantages, such as, the creation of competitive risk by shifting the previously unique ‘value proposition’ of TAFE according to one VET practitioner:

You know where you have a government-funded component that means a diploma is worth about 3K [three thousand dollars] or so, then it becomes 1K [one thousand dollars] more and it is about the price and where they will pay for this at the level now required. Do we cross subsidise or pass on the cost? Is it then competitive with other courses down the road? Particularly for the workplace programs where you have customers wanting value for money and quality. (VET practitioner)

Competitive risk has escalated under the recent reforms as the increasing cost of a TAFE diploma diminishes in value against a degree program. Increasingly, the unique place of TAFE courses are under challenge and threat in the experience of these VET practitioners. VET practitioners attributed the vulnerability of the
sector to rapid and frequent macro funding changes that resulted in high levels of individual risk (see Coates, et al., 2010). VET practitioners understood that those risks were felt differently within the structure of the organisation where there are those who define risk and ‘those to whom they are allocated’ (Beck, 2009a, p.195). There was a fundamental agreement from VET practitioners that difficult changes were often imposed by figures who were transient, not really committed to the organisation or TAFEs community obligations for the long term and were unperturbed by the impact of risk on individuals. The converse notion that these individuals were attempting to make TAFE work within the current difficulties did not appear to be the understanding of practitioners. Their function was to impose change observed a VET practitioner:

Nasty changes driven by outsiders. Sometimes those at the top don’t stay because they don’t belong. They are brought in to do some nasty things. (VET practitioner)

The charge implicit in this comment is that the decision making focus is on dollars and not pedagogy, and this has forced TAFEs to cut back on delivery hours to make a profit. The equation was simple to one practitioner: ‘With less dollars per student, in real terms, something must go’ (VET practitioner). VET practitioners echoed a common theme that they had insufficient input in the sector into the practical application and impact of change that affected their working practices and identity (see for example, Black, 2009; Grace, 2006; Grace, 2008). Beck’s (1992, 2009a) risk theory apprehends the distance separating those defining risk and those having to deal with it. VET practitioners sense this disconnection from the policy and structural apparatus within the VET sector and push back against the unfair burden imposed by risk driven compliance systems
that benefit those in positions of power but not VET practitioners or their students (further detailed examination in chapter six). VET practitioners feared recent changes were part of a move to a self-funding TAFE with the loss of the larger community and educational obligations that many felt were fundamental to their role. These sentiments were echoed by The Australian Education Union’s (AUE) Victorian branch deputy president, Justin Mullaly (2013), ‘the State Government’s decision to make further cuts to TAFE is completely outrageous and by no means in the economic and social interests [my emphasis] of this state’.

Emanating from attempts to manage the macro level financial risk in education VET practitioners have endured a constant succession of restructures. One VET practitioner had been through a number of restructures to accommodate sector reforms and could compare the severity of them:

I don't think that is unusual in the TAFEs I am not sure if it is as complex as what happened in 1997. Where there were all the mergers and the gossip and the collapse of Barton. I am not sure it is quite like that. (VET practitioner)

This comment demonstrates how turmoil in the sector becomes normalised and chronic insecurity becomes simply a condition of the wider risk environment (see Beck, 2000b; 2009a; Bauman, 2001, 2004).

There were personal impacts when friends and colleagues were no longer employed as short-term contracts expired or they took redundancy packages and left the organisation. It is doubtful that any organisation can conduct a restructure that does not inevitably leave those remaining as well as those leaving shocked,
hurt and feeling betrayed. These inevitable resentments were echoed by a VET practitioner:

They would like to sack every person and just hire one to teach everything. To them that would be awesome they would have far less outgoing on the students. They have always wanted to get rid of teachers because they are a cost liability in their minds. Really one course, one teacher, 5 billion students is their perfect system. (VET practitioner)

Conversely, another VET practitioner understood that the organisation needed to restructure to obtain ‘economies of scale and systems’ (VET practitioner). However, a constant concern was the impact on students, that these changes were not being made with the best interests of students in mind, nor did they take into account how the student experience would be impacted.

Another VET practitioner identified an unintended consequence of restructuring as that of retaining the wrong people. Those who had high level skills and opportunities were often able to leave quickly and many did so. This left some behind who might be best gone, as a practitioner suggested:

Teachers who were good at the job with very good feedback from students were let go and others were kept. No reciprocity or consideration for the quality of the teachers who were let go. Financial issues lead the way from a HR standpoint not educational need. (VET practitioner)

While VET practitioners questioned the organisation’s handling of restructures, they were cognisant of the larger macro environment within which it was ‘difficult to balance staff and program needs’ (VET practitioner). They were not averse to the role of innovation and continuous improvement; rather they
expressed a need to have sound evidence for change and clarity in relation to its outworking.

Undoubtedly, upheaval and disruption are the hallmarks of any restructuring and these were evident in the responses of VET practitioners. Sector responses to macro risk through restructuring have significant impacts on the structures within which practitioners work. One of the most significant identified universally by VET practitioners was the risk created by a ‘loss of knowledge’ when a restructure occurs (VET practitioner).

The amplification of risk responsibility for many of the VET practitioners interviewed was linked to their obligation to the unique nature of TAFE and, therefore, their implicit responsibility to ensure students were not disadvantaged in the upheaval of restructures. Beck’s (1992) ‘privatisation’ of risk became evident as practitioners described how they took ownership of extra tasks and scrambled to acquit them given that the tasks did not decrease nor disappear just because a restructure was in progress. In fact, they argued that the loss of experienced staff meant that many processes became inefficient as those less experienced or skilled took them over, compounding the inefficiencies and creating a symbiotic cycle of risk (see Apgar, 2006).

VET practitioners described a litany of problems as part of the impact of restructuring. They included disruption to course growth, negative impact on commercial projects, the risk to student outcomes with the loss of experienced staff, the extra cost in time and energy and their disempowerment in the process
VET practitioners complained of inadequate risk management strategies to manage the issues they needed to deal with on a daily basis. One exasperated practitioner exclaimed, ‘Can I just say risk management in TAFE is an oxymoron!’ (VET practitioner).

These risks are the private side of globalisation that results from responses to the competitive macro level financial structures of education. VET practitioners acknowledged macro level competition within the education sector as causative of the risks that they struggled to contain during restructuring. Some felt that VET practitioners were experiencing all the pain while a perceived ‘top heavy management’ were not, as this practitioner said:

A lot comes from within [the organisation] and what frightens me is, what the quals are of the people making the decisions? It is almost like a committee to create a horse and they come up with a camel. (VET practitioner)

In Canzler, Kaufman and Kesselring’s (2008, p. 78) terms they had become risk’s ‘legitimate addressee of responsibility’. Some resented this ‘address’ intensely. At the same time VET practitioners felt that balancing program and staff needs was difficult for everyone and, therefore, they tried to predict their risk exposure in order to minimise it. Essentially, some embraced the process of individualisation and created their own ‘reflexive biography’ (Beck, 1992, p. 135). Others responded through passive resistance strategies manifesting ‘risk antagonism’ (see Beck, 2009a). Still others simply left. These responses created considerable anxiety as Bauman’s (2001, 2004) understanding of the precariousness of identity suggests. As one practitioner said, ‘when I first started
you had support, you knew what was expected but not anymore, they expect too much. That’s why people don’t last’ (VET practitioner).

The crisis of obligation expressed by VET practitioners created a concomitant risk for practitioners’ professional identity as the notion of the ‘competent professional’ was disturbed by these changes and their subsequent upheaval (see Guthrie, 2009; 2010b). Risk at the macro level was dealt with through organisational restructuring that in turn necessitated that VET practitioners reconstruct their individual social, cultural and political response (see for example, Taylor-Gooby, 2000; Pidgeon, Kasperon & Slovic, 2003; Lupton, 1999). The reality of these demands on VET practitioners made it difficult for them to reconcile their experiences with the ideal of the ‘New VET Professional’ (see Smith, 2010).

**Dual sector dilemmas**

TAFE environments are complex given the competitive environment in which they operate in Victoria; however, this is compounded further for those operating within a dual sector model. As the TAFE Reform Panel (DEECD, 2013, p. 44) notes, dual sector universities have ‘for some time been reducing their vocational training opportunities to focus on higher-funded degree and above-level activity’. VET practitioners’ concern about the unique contribution of TAFE being ‘squeezed out’ may also reflect the prevailing direction of dual sector universities. The Panel expressed additional concern that much of the executive management in dual sector universities was from the higher education sector and tended to create a focus on higher education within the institutions (DEECD, 2013). VET
practitioners interpreted these tendencies as evidence of a lack of loyalty from leadership and a lack of understanding about the impact of policy changes on course delivery. Such tendencies within dual sector universities may underpin the dissatisfaction expressed by the VET practitioners with the contradiction of the organisation’s success juxtaposed against the restructure of the TAFE component. VET practitioners identified their greater exposure to risk in a dual sector environment through the different resourcing of the two areas:

We are constantly getting emails from the VC saying congratulations we have appointed this person as dean of …that sounds like they are putting on deans left right and centre but they are decimating TAFE. It is a slap in the face to teachers here. I am reliably told by someone in higher ed. they are not employing new people they are appointing people already here but somehow I just don't believe it. (VET practitioner)

Beck’s (1992, 2009a) thesis that risk has global reach is evident in new understandings of risk as reputational risk (Power, Scheytt, Soin & Sahlin, 2009). Dual sector institutions negotiate a complex risk environment, as VET practitioners pointed out, that focuses attention on global university ranking culminating in TAFE’s lack of consequence. According to Power, Scheytt, Soin and Sahlin (2009), the best-known global systems for university rankings are the Shanghai Jiao Tong Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, which are arrived at in slightly different ways but are both extremely influential.

Risk to university reputations has historically been focused on the establishment and maintenance of their local influence through the work of well-known individuals. The advent of global rankings and the competition to achieve a top
ranking to attract fee paying international students exposes dual sector universities to increasing reputational risk that constricts their focus to higher education. These global forces of risk exert considerable pressure on dual sector universities to protect and develop their reputation as part of their ongoing competitiveness and can lead to risk aversion strategies that constrain VET practitioners:

I have probably felt the constraint of coming into an organisation like this that I didn’t feel before. In many ways the environment is constraining and not enabling so it doesn't allow for real difference in the way that other consultancy work in industry does. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners’ concerns are reflected in contemporary organisational behaviour within the global environment. Power, Scheytt, Soin and Sahlin (2009) describe this behaviour stating:

Certainly, a society of agents and organizations concerned with how they are perceived, and who shapes what they do to anticipate and manage how they are perceived, is likely to be one where innovation is increasingly problematic, where risk adversity is normalized and where expensive ‘audit trails’ and due process pervade the texture of organizational life (p. 317).

Clearly, negative responses to the nature of the organisation as a response to risk in a dual sector university environment were evident in this research; however, there were positive aspects of the nature of the organisation that VET practitioners identified very strongly with. Foremost in these was the identification of quality as a source of significant satisfaction for practitioners in their work and status as VET professionals:

To their credit the organisation responds to quality requirements—does more than required and takes compliance seriously. It is a benchmark for others. But it pays the price for quality when others
VET practitioners demonstrated a sense of pride in their association with this identified strength and saw their commitment to the unique nature of TAFE coalescing with the organisation’s commitment to quality. Dual sector institutions can be seen to provide a strong advantage to both higher education and TAFE if managed collaboratively, where each component could bring a unique focus and capacity in the service of community obligations (see Matthews & Murphy, 2010).

Conversely, the advantages of dual sector operation was challenged particularly by VET practitioners who complained that the ‘higher education operations of the organisation were much better resourced and supported than TAFE’ (VET practitioner). As a consequence of this imbalance TAFE was more vulnerable to the forces of macro risk. VET practitioners identified the risk to outcomes resulting from some TAFE students requiring more support than higher education students.

In a number of ways the higher education function of the organisation is in direct competition to the TAFE component. One practitioner felt that, ‘higher education has taken over TAFE’. TAFE courses at the advanced diploma and diploma levels are competing with the introduction of associate degrees and present a ‘reduced cost difference to the student’ (DEECD, 2013, p. 7; Callan & Bowman, 2013). This brings another set of risks said one practitioner:
TAFE is in competition with higher education. That is why TAFE is starting to run higher ed. things. Might be quite sensible in a dual sector but more of an ‘ask’ in a stand-alone environment. (VET practitioner)

The insecure nature of funding for TAFE currently based on regular short engagement periods posed a risk to its operation according to VET practitioners. VET practitioners contrasted the funding compliance in TAFE comprising engagement periods of ‘weeks’ to the continuity of funding for higher education through the HECS system. Current funding regimes completely missed the community obligation practitioners felt to disadvantaged students who might engage in short episodes:

It’s a wonderful opportunity to empower people…even if their desire is to come and have an experience and a qual is not what they want. We have the students who come only one semester and that is important. (VET practitioner)

In addition, the way outcomes were measured was a serious problem for many VET practitioners as the measures focused on outputs and did not pick up the value of TAFE in the development of learning pathways, community engagement and social inclusion. These long-term outcomes were not just to propel students into higher education, as valuable as that might be, but out of disadvantage. One VET practitioner who works part time in both the higher education and TAFE operations of the institution felt there was more pressure in TAFE:

The higher education environment is so much easier than TAFE. You have time to think and develop resources. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners’ experience and perception of higher education was of less onerous compliance and funding regimes and an environment less impacted by
rapid changes in workforce demand. The TAFE sector has historically been highly sensitive and reactive to workforce skill development when compared to the higher education component of dual sector universities. Although, the Bradley Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) has outlined changes that will allow more reactive responses from higher education institutions than has previously been the case (Bretherton, 2011). In addition, policies announced in the 2014 Federal Budget by the Abbott Government have the potential to accelerate these changes through deregulation of university fees (National Tertiary Education Union, 2014).

VET practitioners expressed mixed feelings about their role in higher education pathways where TAFE students were encouraged to appropriate credits to pathway into a higher education course. On the one hand, they saw this as an outworking of their role of ongoing community obligations to students to assist them to further their education and life chances. On the other hand, VET practitioners lamented the view that TAFE’s value was solely as a pathway to higher education:

TAFE is undervalued as ‘just’ a stream of people working with students who are potentially a pathway to higher education. It is a misguided view and doesn’t focus on TAFE, as one of its strengths. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners articulated the main value of TAFE in dual sector institutions as a feeder to meet SES targets and boost student numbers. VET practitioners objected to the perception that TAFE was a less significant component within a much larger and more important higher education system. One practitioner quantified the focus on higher education as, ‘Uni focus? 110%’ (VET
practitioner). Although this practitioner reflects a particular view, in many ways the organisation faces a new set of challenges from an expansion of private RTOs.

**Competing with private RTOs**

Enrolments in Victoria point to a significant increase in VET participation with government subsidised enrolments in 2008 approximately 380,000 growing to 670,000 in 2012. The TAFE sector grew by 11% while private RTOs increased exponentially with a 76% increase. In the four years from 2008 to 2012 the share of government subsidised funding to RTOs increased significantly from 34% to 58% (Sheehan, 2013, March 14).

The growth in private RTOs has seen an increase in competition from narrow band specialty RTOs. Many of these RTOs provide high quality, flexible and short duration training programs targeted at very select student cohorts (Maslen, 2014, March 24). They are particularly successful with student cohorts who are already or have previously been in the workforce and are looking to change career or gain credentials in an area in which they have existing experience. Short duration courses appeal to this student cohort and may be appropriate. However, TAFE institutions must compete for this student cohort through their own offerings of ‘short courses’, ‘quick track programs’ or ‘skills upgrade programs’, all of which are designed to address the preferences of this lucrative student cohort.

Industry partnerships that provide customised training programs for commercial organisations sit within a larger organisational structure in dual sector
organisations compared to their private RTO competitors. VET practitioners complained about a lack of competitiveness in dual sector institutions given the levies applied by the organisation to deliver training in industry. These added costs were seen as a risk imposed by the structures in which they operated. One of the hidden problems of competition with RTOs exposes VET practitioners to the risk of owning the consequences of an internal organisational levy that made their programs ‘less financially competitive’ (VET practitioner).

The structure of small RTOs provides an advantage in responding quickly to market forces that dual sector TAFE institutions, ‘unable to compete with low cost private providers’, do not enjoy (Maslen, 2014, March 24). Significantly, the ability of private RTOs to respond to changes in the market to maximise their return on investment means that unproductive programs can be quickly jettisoned. VET practitioners were concerned that this practice created a potential for market failure. The production of insufficient skilled workers might risk markets collapsing altogether with economic and social consequences across the whole community (DEECD, 2013; Sheenan, 2013, March 14). It seemed apparent to VET practitioners that market forces cannot simply manage the global forces of risk, where private RTOs quickly jettison programs, without creating further unintended risk. Traditionally, TAFE has provided stability in the market place delivering some of the less financially rewarding programs’ (VET practitioner).

In March 2013, John Dawkins chair of the National Skills Standards Council identified a growing risk in the VET sector when he questioned the quality of some qualifications. He warned that underperforming RTOs could ‘destabilise the
training system and labour market by undermining the integrity of qualifications’ (Sheehan, 2013, March 14). VET practitioners interviewed for this research saw the issue as education versus credentialing. The practitioners saw themselves as ‘educators’ in the broadest sense and were concerned about quality education and life outcomes for their students. One VET practitioner confirmed this sense of vocation saying, ‘If we can spend the time with the student, actually developing the student that has huge value’ (VET practitioner).

Dawkins’ concern is a reality for irate VET practitioners who insist that qualifications are being devalued already. Employers are responding say practitioners:

So that a person walks away with a certificate which to the best of their knowledge they have got it and they go out to industry and industry thinks; what the hell? This person hasn't got the right skill demonstration. I know of two organisations where they now interview their potential workers, not only across the table but they set up scenarios and ask them to go and show how you do this and that. To see clearly if they have any knowledge or not and they blacklist students from some RTOs. Students have taken that bite of the apple and can't use that money again. It’s sad. (VET practitioner)

Quality course delivery created a conflict for VET practitioners between their obligation to the student and the budget of the institution:

We promote a five star rating for quality but do they think it all happens by magic? There’s a lack of understanding of educational work and what teaching and learning actuality mean. You can’t run a course and tick people off in face to face in five days, as the human brain doesn't work that way. We can run five days and get them to go off and do assessment and then assess them. Teachers who have hours and courses cut identify that as a risk. The other risk is that we are not sticking to budget and are more costly than the private sector. (VET practitioner)
One VET practitioner identified quality as costly for the institution:

When compared to a private RTO we are coming up to be very expensive—not to say we don't offer good value and have a good reputation. At the end of the day, an extra 1,000 and five or six training days to what they are comparing us to—other training providers, a Cert. IV in eight days. Why do 16 with us? It’s a more quality program; it’s not just fees but the time factor. The loss of workdays. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners’ concerns that short duration courses may risk the quality of skills acquisition is supported by earlier research (see for example, Halliday-Wynes & Misko, 2013). Strong competition from RTOs offering short delivery timeframes didn’t sit well with VET practitioners and their community obligation sensibilities or their commitment to quality training and the sound qualifications these produced.

While acknowledging that there are some very excellent private and community based RTOs providing quality-training services, practitioners were alarmed at some RTO practices and the risk they posed to the workforce, VET sector and students. The development of a national training market has resulted in much greater competition between TAFE institutions and private RTOs. One VET practitioner lamented the way that this new risk environment is evident in the insular approach of private RTOs to their intellectual property. Where once practitioners’ enhanced quality by sharing their thinking and resources, within the bounds of probity, now there was a ‘greater restriction and distrust across the sector’ (VET practitioner).
All VET practitioners who took part in this research had either worked, were working for or had current links with private RTOs. There was almost universal concern about the way RTOs operated. One practitioner said:

They [private RTOs] invest lots of their resources in compliance, ticking the boxes. Very little resources in pedagogical delivery. Absolutely baffles me on paper to see how they deliver and what they deliver. How on earth can they pass the audit? (VET practitioner)

Another said:

[Quality is] far better at TAFE. I can say that there were no quality systems at one RTO, they focused mainly on getting students in. (VET practitioner)

Another agreed:

Far better quality systems at TAFE. (VET practitioner)

Professional development was another concern for practitioners:

I’ve worked in private RTOs and no one does the professional development. It’s a loss of a day’s work. The only professional development is to upgrade their Cert IV TAE. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners saw their community obligation and professional standing being trashed by these RTOs who were ‘fly by nights’ that seemed to ‘get away with it’ (VET practitioner). Chief ASQA Commissioner, Chris Robinson concurred that the ‘TAFE reforms have pushed the system to the brink’ (Maslen, 2014, March 24, p.15). These types of reforms created complexity in maintaining the quality standards of the sector. Another practitioner linked this observation to the ways in which some RTOs understood the nature of risk and spent a great deal of time and money investing in strong risk management practices through compliance trails. Maintaining high levels of compliance to mitigate the changing
nature of risk of audit almost became the ‘entire focus for some RTOs’ (VET practitioner). VET practitioners identified these RTOs as ‘other’ and ‘different’ to TAFE as a strategy to minimise the risk they represent to the accepted quality norms and taboos within their TAFE institution (see for example, Douglas, 1966; Hope, 2005; Wilkinson, 2001; Ball, 2003a, 2003b). This discourse preserved the centrality of community obligation as a point of difference for these VET practitioners.

Conclusion

The operation of risk as a globalised force in education could be concealed in the everyday activities of VET practitioners. For these practitioners Beck’s (1992, 2009a) risk theory analysis is explanatory for their observations regarding the globalised forces that impact the education sector in Australia. Practitioners made strong links to the fierce competition in the education sector at a global level and the marketisation of TAFE that has led to the creation of an escalating risk environment. VET practitioners identified the additional and complex exposure to these risk forces that dual sector organisations experienced as compounding the risk of TAFE losing its ‘unique place in the community’ (VET practitioner).

A crisis of obligation exists for practitioners who questioned the future of TAFE given the funding cuts in recent decades. At a time when Australian industry must face global economic challenges TAFE’s capacity to provide robust workforce skills development has become extremely crucial. VET practitioners’ commitment to the unique place of TAFE provides an opportunity to respond positively to the globalised risk environment of education. The capacity of VET
practitioners in this research to remain focused on student engagement in training and education was predicated to a large extent on their commitment to implicit community obligations.

The marketising of VET over the last few decades has created a different set of incentives, risks and pressures on TAFE institutions and private providers. Questions of risk, resulting from changes in the sector, focused on quality course delivery and potential market failure for these practitioners. These cascading results of macro level risk impact on the daily work lives of VET practitioners who experienced a loss of influence and engagement with the structures and policy directions of TAFE.

Macro level risk continues to impact the structures of education delivery and flows into meso or institutional level practices such as compliance regimes. This level of risk impact will be examined in detail in chapter six.
CHAPTER SIX: Managing risk, feeding the system and avoiding blame

Introduction
Meso level responses to risk are the focus of this chapter that will examine VET practitioners’ experience of systems, norms and workplace practices operating in a dual sector organisation. It is at the meso level that the macro forces of globalisation must be negotiated and mediated by VET practitioners. Practitioners, therefore, are required to operate within the risk management parameters of the organisation on a daily basis with the attendant tension of conflicting obligations and the forces of global competition.

Complex risk management strategies and practices oscillate within the organisation in an attempt to contain global risk through governance structures, compliance systems and VET practitioner performance. VET practitioners’ commitment to the unique place of TAFE and its community obligations can be divergent when viewed against the macro risk forces that continue to challenge dual sector organisations. The following chapter will examine practitioners’ concerns with compliance systems and the ways in which compliance risks are managed, the requirements of audit and its implications. An examination of workload issues with specific attention on the use of sessional VET practitioners will complete the discussion in this chapter.

Confronting compliance
VET practitioners identified compliance systems within the meso level as contested sites. They discerned a tension within their role in the TAFE sector
created by increasing compliance requirements that are driven by the growing neo
Practitioners pointed to these external drivers as the locus of disempowerment for
any real form of control over the compliance requirements generated at the meso
level that continue to overtake them and the unique place they believe TAFE has
through its community obligations. In addition, practitioners perceived
significant tension underlying a culture of risk avoidance that permeated the
organisation, affecting everyone and constraining their capacity as educators to
make a difference in the community.

The preposition of reflexivity that is expressed in risk theory provides a unique
insight into this collision of the global forces of financial competition and the
community commitment of VET practitioners (see Beck, 2000a, 2009a). It is at
this point of interaction between these competing forces, complained VET
practitioners, that they were exposed to organisational risk through risk
management strategies, compliance systems and audit processes. They identified
the discourse of ‘financial competition’ as a means to contain their practice and
performance within the required compliance boundaries, thus lowering the
organisation’s exposure to risk. Risk theory’s reflexive modernisation helps to
illustrate the ways in which VET practitioners identified risk’s potential to
precipitate the symbiotic escalation of risk management through compliance
systems (see Beck, 1992; Scott & Marshall, 2009).

On an individual level, very real concerns existed for VET practitioners to ensure
that they continued to feed the system accurately and avoid blame for significant
risk realisation. As one nervous practitioner commented, ‘there are so many procedures it is easy to make mistakes’ (VET practitioner). Beck (2009b, p. 3) explains this permeating sense of risk anxiety in the following terms; ‘everyone poses more or less of a risk for everyone else. The qualitative distinction either/or is replaced by the quantitative difference between more or less. Nobody is not a risk’. The cycle of organisational critique created by reflexive modernisation appeared to significantly underpin VET practitioners’ anxiety as Beck’s (1992, 2009a) theory posits, with the concomitant growth and individualisation of risk. It was easy for practitioners to see risk everywhere once they began to view the organisation’s systems and procedures from the lens of risk.

Further evidence of the escalation of the cycle of risk was manifested in a distrust of managers whom VET practitioners suspected generated compliance activities, from their standpoint within the meso level, whether or not they were needed. Some VET practitioners moderated their criticism of managers indicating that managers were not immune to the symbiotic processes of reflexive modernisation and risk anxiety themselves. One practitioner revealed insight into the role of the manager through personal experience, ‘when you have a management component in your role you see more of the top down, and you understand why compliance paperwork needs to be done. I had no idea what was needed before (VET practitioner). In such an unforgiving funding regime VET practitioners were not totally myopic and could also reflect on their own practice, identifying the pressure to manage risk by over compliance in the classroom. ‘I guess that is one of the dangers, we actually end up over assessing students for the sake of a paper trail’ (VET practitioner).
Conversely, reflexivity produced some very positive outcomes for practitioners who were able to analyse their practice and reflect on the tension inherent in their role. They identified their commitment to a unique TAFE where community obligations meant student skills development was their first priority. This was also understood by practitioners to be juxtaposed with the commercial funding realities of a sector under threat. As the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment (HRSCEE) (2014) confirmed:

As part of providing pathways to employment and further education, but also in relation to the broader socio-economic context, TAFE performs a highly significant role in the community as a provider of opportunities for those in positions of disadvantage and vulnerability. This crucial role constitutes a particular complexity for TAFE as it operates in the competitive training market (p. 130).

The threat to TAFE left VET practitioners sensitive to their risk of failure that could mean funding cuts; student disadvantage and staff job losses. One practitioner summed up the general sense of anxiety about compliance systems linked to funding, saying that ‘small mistakes in recording student progress’ could lead to a concatenation of events resulting in ‘the loss of funding for a whole course’ (VET practitioner). No one wanted to be the catalyst for undermining course funding, which created a heightened sense of risk for VET practitioners in completing their everyday compliance tasks.

The processes of reflexive modernisation were further evident in VET practitioners’ responses challenging ‘expert’ auditors and indicating a lack of trust in the compliance systems that underpin the audit process (see for example, Power, 2000; Beck 1992). The ongoing lack of trust in the system revealed a site of contention and in some cases chronic insecurity (see Beck, 1992, 2000b). VET
practitioners charged that the management of risk through compliance systems has resulted in a significant change in the last few decades in the nature of their work. Most practitioners felt that the balance between compliance practices and teaching functions have been inverted, as one practitioner comparing the changes of the last decade said, ‘admin was more admin focused, teachers had more specialist teaching engagement’ (VET practitioner). Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005) along with Guthrie (2010b) support the contention that administration functions have moved from their previous focus on practitioner support, to acquitting compliance and audit functions.

This research contends that the individuation of risk in the context of Beck’s ‘risk society’ has produced changes in the VET sector that have impacted the traditional modes of practice for these VET practitioners (see for example, Guthrie, 2010b; Beck, 2009a; Lupton 1999). These changes are nowhere more pronounced than in the balance between functions VET practitioners understand as purely compliance and those that relate to their teaching tasks.

Changes at the macro level have coincided with another restructuring of the organisation resulting in administration services steadily centralising and integrating following the wider dual sector trend (DEECD, 2013). As these changes have occurred practitioners observed that they have been required to take on significant compliance burdens. In addition, the greater centralisation of administration and compliance documentation has in itself created a symbiotic cycle of escalating risk as more compliance work is devolved and requires increasing evidence that it has been completed. The findings of this research are
supported by those of Harris, Simons and Clayton’s (2005) that highlighted VET practitioners’ sense that time away from the ‘real’ task of teaching inhibited creativity and innovation as education work competes for VET practitioners’ time and attention.

Some practitioners lamented the growth in administration tasks and their impact on the efficient use of their time; ‘admin takes longer for teachers than it does for admin people. It’s an inefficient use of time. There’s no time left to develop learning plans’ (VET practitioner). Practitioners see these changes as a move away from the ‘core business’ of teaching and TAFE’s community obligations, thus increasing the tensions between their individual focus on community obligations through teaching and the organisation’s focus on compliance tasks and funding. For VET practitioners and educators the conflict between ‘teaching and compliance’ appears to have grown in tandem as risk’s demand to produce increasing evidence of compliance has developed (see for example, Beck, 2009a; Starr, 2012b).

Dual sector TAFE institutions were identified by practitioners with external RTO experience as sites of particular tension given the complexity of the compliance requirements that were ‘out of sync’ with structures, creating a disconnection between ‘what we do and the forms’ (VET practitioner). The findings of this research indicate that the focus of systems in this dual sector organisation was understood to be tailored for higher education and not those of TAFE. The competing requirements of these TAFE and higher education institutions can result in a privileging of the needs of higher education (see for example,
Wheelahan, Arkoudis, Moodie, Fredman & Bexley, 2012; DEECD, 2013). This research found that within this organisation the TAFE system’s competency based requirements were made to fit into the needs of higher education systems rather than just privileging them. Practitioners insisted that this created duplication and double handling, ‘in a stand-alone TAFE everything works together, in dual sector organisation we are not like that higher education takes priority over everything and adds to the compliance workload. I have been in dual sector organisations for 26 years and I know how it works’ (VET practitioner).

While they may acquiesce to acquitting compliance procedures once, repetition of the same exercise due to siloed systems was extremely frustrating and time wasting for them. Practitioners asserted that duplication short-changed their ability to do what they believed they were there to—teach. One practitioner, new to the TAFE sector, was surprised by the compliance systems:

I found the compliance systems and administrative work really onerous and such a change from where I had come from in industry consultancy. It got in the way of the teaching and development side of things all the time. (VET practitioner)

Increasing administration sharpened the point of tension that practitioners needed to negotiate between the meso level forces of global competition and their own community obligations expressed at the micro level. Practitioners saw the need to ‘feed the system’ with compliance documentation as pedantic and constricting. These documents were not seen as useful for their teaching, rather it appeared to be about maintaining the compliance system itself. As one practitioner summed up her frustration, ‘Everything I do has to have a paper trail and it would take several days to go through’ (VET practitioner). As ‘addressees of risk’ VET
practitioners saw their capacity to influence the system as quite limited. One practitioner said:

I guess the way some of our courses are designed lacks flexibility, it’s a risk. We try to be as flexible as possible but we are working with inflexible systems. The harnesses we have to wear restricts any movement really. (VET practitioner)

There was a strong response from practitioners that compliance systems altered their professional teaching practice. At what point, one questioned, did the amount of administrative compliance work tip the scale and turn her into an admin worker (VET practitioner)? A lone VET practitioner, in a course management role, believed that this was simply part of the industrial agreement that the institution had negotiated:

Teachers here have always had an administrative role. Contract and ongoing staff, it is part of their [time] allotment and sessional staff. We pay them to compensate for this time. (VET practitioner)

In some ways this highlights the crisis of obligation that has become part of the TAFE sector where macro risk management strategies collide with VET practitioner role identification as educators and contributors to the community through the TAFE system (see Dow, 2013). This is not a new theme as the Kangan Report (1974, p. 23) confirms, ‘the main purpose of education is the betterment and development of individual people and their contribution to the good of the community. Technical and further education should be planned accordingly’. VET sector reform appears to oscillate around the traditionally constructed oppositional notions of community obligation and financial efficiency, rather than finding ways to encompass both notions and deliver quality education.
In VET practitioners’ experience teaching to compliance and ticking boxes did not equate to quality course delivery. Such practices only produced the necessary compliance paperwork:

I devised the really ridiculous checklists and questions in ways that are identifiable to an auditor but we continued on doing what we had been in the classroom. That is where the connection is broken. Auditors have a diverse range of qualifications and experience they are not necessarily experts in VET or teaching. They want certain bits of paper. You can't do both it is one or the other. You either focus your attention and delivery on quality in the classroom or you can take time from that filling in bits of paper. (VET practitioner)

Etzioni’s (1961) description of normative power is explanatory for this behaviour as many practitioners accepted the overarching requirement of compliance systems to remain within the normative environment, rather than resisting these practices openly and risking ejection from the organisation in which they believed it was still possible to fulfil their community obligation. Archer (2007, p. 19) posits that individuals can be reflexively aware of the unfairness of their situation but will continue to do what is important to them, what they value by ‘devising 2nd and 3rd best options’. VET practitioners were continually pursuing ways to hold their commitment to community obligations in tension with the compliance system.

VET practitioners also protested that compliance training took up significant amounts of their limited professional development time. Professional development, practitioners felt, was focused on understanding compliance requirements, new systems and technology rather than adult learning theory and research that underpins theory. Moreover, practitioners also questioned the amount and breadth of compliance and wondered if this ‘shotgun’ approach was
because government, through regulatory mechanisms (e.g. AQTF), ‘didn’t know just what they were looking for’ or exactly ‘what type of compliance evidence they needed’ so it was simpler to gather as much of everything as possible (VET practitioner). VET practitioners blamed this need to feed the system for creating onerous reporting. A great deal of frustration was evident in the ways in which compliance systems operated. It was here that the tensions between macro level forces and the micro level focus on practitioners met in tangible ways in the operational priorities of their organisation. This finding was illustrated by one practitioner, who said:

We are supposed to fill it [enrolment forms] out while on the phone with them and then mail it out for them to sign. They have a draconian way of doing things. You look like an idiot. It is all the stats that Skills Victoria want or whatever they are called now or didn't they go broke, that is why we are in deep shit. (VET practitioner)

Practitioners identified these external risks in relation to the complex funding environment and what seemed a very distant quality system as significant drivers in the organisation’s compliance systems that they had to contend with on a daily basis. One practitioner explained it saying:

My perception is that someone a long way away from us locked away in their office makes the decision. I am not seeing any evidence of consultation. They just say this is the policy, it is coming out, and people need to make decisions. I’m not against that but I just think there’s not any consultation about it. (VET practitioner)

They also pointed to an extra overlay of processes and duplication resulting from their location in a dual sector institution where the requirements of higher education drove the compliance regime. Therefore, they were not always in sync with the needs of a differently constructed TAFE sector and much less in line
with the community obligations that VET practitioners continued to value and attempted to acquit.

Practitioners felt that there were strong external drivers developing and maintaining systems that demonstrate compliance to standards and legislation. These created ‘inflexible systems mismatched with a flexible market’ (VET practitioner). Inflexible systems were also layered and complex in dual sector universities and made VET practitioners look incompetent when they failed to work efficiently. It was clear to practitioners that achieving educational results has become ever more entangled with the managing of risk through compliance systems and regulated teaching environments.

Practitioners called for more streamlining and greater systematising focusing on student and staff needs for transparency. A frustrated VET practitioner recounted problems signing off on students’ awards:

Students are told to apply to graduate online, the coordinator has to sign paper forms but students can be notified they can’t graduate but the coordinator has approved it! They may not be able to graduate because of a library fine but it’s not transparent in the system to coordinators. (VET practitioner)

Practitioners with coordinating roles frequently complained that they became the ‘addressee of risk’ with faults in the system coalescing at their desks, ‘making us look incompetent’ (VET practitioner). Practitioners felt their lack of capacity to change the system was unsatisfactorily juxtaposed against their position of responsibility in dealing with the student fallout from such systems failures.

While significant tensions between the meso and micro level operations of the organisation exist, a fundamental driver of resistance was not seeing educational
results for the compliance hours required. It seemed a poor ‘return on investment’
to these practitioners. Disquiet is evident in other vocational training settings such
as the United Kingdom where Lawry and Tedder’s (2012) research argues against
the performative turn in the education system. Rather, these researchers promote
greater pedagogical mentoring and professional formation for educators. Billett
(2013, p. 192) echoes the call for a mature Australian TAFE, responsive to local
need and moving away from highly homogenised sameness that is a ‘vain attempt
by central agencies to secure uniformity and conformity’.

In contrast, when asked about the positive aspect of compliance systems VET
practitioners were quick to outline aspects of compliance that were worthwhile
and informative for their practice. These positive aspects invariably involved
interaction with other practitioners over course content, pedagogy or student
issues. In each of these activities their identity and practice as professional
educators was at the centre of their engagement. This supported their commitment
to TAFE’s community obligations. Two significant compliance processes that
were identified as adding value were validation and moderation (see for example,
Davids, 2008; Mitchell, 2008a; Mitchell and McKenna, 2006). These were
significantly positive opportunities to share and learn in an established activity
that was a safe platform within the organisation. It was through these
professional processes that practitioners could contest ideas, discuss innovation
and experience support for their professional identity and judgment. The issues
discussed related to the following table (see table below).
The processes of validation and moderation are similar but have a different outcomes focus. They both require engagement around educational resources and tools that get to the core of the educational process for practitioners and therefore, are a rewarding, satisfying and identity confirming part of their role. These well-established compliance requirements also act as significant risk mitigation strategies as they spread risk and minimise blame. Consensus driven processes ensure that compliance is achieved and blame is dispersed or avoided while still feeding the requirements of the system. For VET practitioners the operation of these processes as group activities provided a degree of anonymity where their individual identity was subsumed in that of the group. The safety of this group identity mitigated risk and contributed to practitioners’ capacity to engage more fully with the process. The dichotomy of operating within a competitive organisational environment from a collegiate adult learning standpoint is to some
degree negated in these compliance activities (see Beck, 2006). The complaint from VET practitioners was that these activities were all too few. These activates also served to provide meaningful evidence of compliance practices for audit purposes.

**Passing audit**

Beck (1992, 1999, 2000b) and Power (1997, 2000) identify risk as a driving force in creating environments where the auditing of compliance systems flourishes. Current audit processes have their origins in production and industrialisation where quality assurance has produced universal standards (e.g. ISO 9000). Organisational objectives are measured by performance measures through monitoring and audit that feeds back into organisational objectives creating a ‘closed loop of review’ (Power, 2000, p. 113). VET practitioners within this research were subjected to this cycle of review through internal audits conducted by the organisation and those conducted by external auditors.

Power (2000, p. 114) suggests that, ‘audit and related ideas of monitoring continue to be understood uncritically; they can be rapidly disseminated without developing an understanding of what may be at stake’. VET practitioners in this research clearly identified with the potential for audit processes to be uncritically imposed upon them, exposing them to risk. One practitioner recounted:

> I have had two audits and seeing how an auditor interprets things, which is quite different, you discover it is really about covering your back and how an auditor interprets things to the letter. As an educator I interpret the spirit of the training package. (VET practitioner)
Within the context of audit VET practitioners are confronted with the compounding problems of the ‘behavioural objectives model’ where behavioural performances are described through the assessment criteria of training packages (Hodge, 2014). It is inevitable that disconnection occurs between the original written intent of training packages and the auditor’s or VET practitioners’ comprehension. The theoretical assertions of this ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Schmidt, 2006) are that ‘strict alignment between the intentions of competency writers and practitioners’ interpretations cannot be expected’ (Hodge, 2014, p. 14). Practitioners justifiably took steps to minimise their exposure to this risk through collaborate group activities such as validation and moderation.

For this group of VET practitioners the audit environment encouraged performances that they identified as responses to the normative expectations of an audit rather than a showcase for student outcomes and classroom competence. The experience of one practitioner exemplifies the normative requirements of auditors:

In one audit the auditor picked up the papers and said it doesn’t feel like enough assessment. The manager looked like she could have jumped across the table and strangled her. The auditor hadn’t even read it! (VET practitioner)

Power (2000, p. 114) supports the notion that it is ‘plausible to suggest that the audit explosion is fundamentally an ideologically driven system for disciplining and controlling doctors, teachers, university lecturers and so on, and not an instrument of genuine accountability’.
The performance of an audit must be negotiated within the expectations and norms set by auditors who have their own views on the symbols of audit and their adequacy. Strategies for managing the underlying threat of an audit required a team effort given the risk that failing an audit presented. Most VET practitioners had tales of course closures due to audit trail failure. One practitioner commented:

It doesn’t mean the course was no good just that the paperwork wasn’t up to it. No one tested the students in the workplace. (VET practitioner)

Another practitioner, with a management role, further highlighted the performance aspects of audit:

It involves a careful balance of being honest toward an audit and preparing all the time to make sure that we pass. It is very important to us to be seen to be doing the right thing in our delivery and programs and our care of the staff. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners identified the classroom as the interface between audits and teaching, where audit trails and teaching practice compete for their attention. A barely concealed sense of resentment was evident from many practitioners who felt their time was not being well spent on acquitting their community obligations to students due to the demands of the audit trail. One practitioner complained that audit trails take too much time due to the minutiae of detail required:

So I have an essay that has in text referencing and paraphrasing and quoting. I can then draw the assumption that they have done the research because it is illustrated here and there, but in the audit they want to see each of those research things as separate to the essay. What a waste of time. (VET practitioner)
Beck suggests society is experimenting on itself (Beck, 1992). Power (2000) argues that auditing has become part of this experiment:

Certainly, there has been little planning or testing of new auditing practices. Auditing has been introduced as an agency of organizational change without a measured consideration of benefits and possible dysfunctional effects. Although some assessment in terms of compliance costs has been introduced, audit and related ideas of monitoring continue to be understood uncritically; they can be rapidly disseminated without developing an understanding of what may be at stake. (p. 114).

VET practitioners are not alone in questioning the uncritical use of auditing as a quality process and efficiency measure. A repercussion of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 was the questioning of audit and regulatory functions in the finance sector. In view of the number of institutions that had high credit ratings yet still managed to collapse as Held (2010, p. 12) notes, ‘the recent financial crisis is the failure at the global level of the existing multilateral institutions, which exist to monitor, contain and manage global financial risks and their contagion’.

Financial sector examples support the claim of VET practitioners that, ‘auditing is about itself’ rather than what is happening in the classroom or students’ workplace skills demonstration. Power’s (1999) analysis provides useful insight:

Quality auditing works both as the specific monitoring and reporting part of the system and also, importantly, as the verification of the system structure as a whole i.e. the integrity of the entire loop of self-observation which this procedural structure represents. This epitomises ‘control of control’ (p.66).

The ‘control of control’ that potentially develops from audit systems is increasingly understood in terms of risk management and contained through
compliance strategies to limit the risk as dual sector universities rationalise their TAFE functions (DEECD, 2013).

In addition, the processes of audit appeared to be in fundamental conflict with the adult learning principles valued by VET practitioners. Open, transparent and collegiate approaches to continuous learning seemed to be antithetical to the experience of audit, where the identification of risk is a complication as it introduces an element of fear and performativity. Power (2000) proposes an alternate approach to this form of audit:

Some forms of audit and inspection need to be radically redesigned with greater sensitivity to their consequences and without slavish adherence to performance measures which serve the audit process and little else. But there is no general critical argument here, and each area needs to be looked at on its own merits. The prospects of a light, self-directed audit process, which harnesses productive learning and self-help to regulatory compliance, is an attractive ideal. Defensive auditing is the antithesis of this idea (p.117).

Some practitioners resisted audit, challenging auditors’ ‘expert knowledge’. One practitioner expressed this resistance saying; ‘auditors understand documentation, not teaching’ (VET practitioner). Risk antagonism was evident in the contest over who is qualified to decide what is risk, and what it means, with VET practitioners sceptical of auditors’ ‘expertise’ and the audit documentation they required (see Beck, 2009a). One practitioner said:

You are creating reams of stuff no one is going to read. Even audit are not going to read it. It looks like documentation, it has the right amount of pages; it must be good. (VET practitioner)
Another said:

I could take you to companies [RTOs] that have the best paperwork systems but if the auditors sat in the class they could see how awful the class is. The trainer thinks they are doing a good job by putting up a power point with the questions and the next slide is all the answers and they get the student to write down the answers. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners’ claims that the current quality assessment system, on which audit relies, may not be working effectively are supported by Misko, Halliday-Wynes, Stanwick and Gemici (2014):

In recent years the quality and rigour of assessments in vocational education and training have been key concerns of VET policy-makers, industry stakeholders, employers and teachers and trainers. These concerns have often been fuelled by perceptions that some providers in the sector are taking short cuts to qualifications. This has put into question the credibility of VET qualifications and the competence of graduates who hold these qualifications (p.11).

The National Skills Standards Council (2013, p. 10) was more strident in its critique claiming, ‘Inconsistent quality of training and assessment is undermining the integrity and value of vocational qualifications’.

The relentless impact of macro level risk on the meso level structures of the organisation creates a ‘flow on effect’ through the systems, disrupting power relations in the experience of these practitioners. It also appeared to sharpen the reflexivity of VET practitioners who must negotiate a ‘power game based on the rules of doubt and uncertainty’ (Culver et al., 2011, p. 14). The large organisational operation of a dual sector university meant that VET practitioners
were potentially further removed from the internal processes than in small RTOs, as one practitioner said:

In small RTOs there is a human face that is the risk manager or compliance manager. Here it is a department, a bit more intangible. (VET practitioner)

Another commented on the stress of audit:

Most people were highly stressed if they had anything to do with the audit process. They were stressed and time poor. It impacted on other operations, teaching roles and they were being coupled up in meetings and processes rather than servicing their clients [students]. I was surprised at the level of fear and panic. People internalised it, if they failed what might happen to their team? (VET practitioner)

The collision between VET practitioners’ community obligations and compliance structures and systems can be understood as an outworking of risk theory’s reflexive modernisation (see Beck, 1992, 2000b, 2009a). As reflexive modernisation tests the boundaries of expertise and certainty the contest over who decides risk and what it means creates an environment in which risk antagonism can flourish. Clearly, for VET practitioners in this research, the overwhelming fidelity to a sense of community obligation creates tension and has ongoing repercussions for work life balance such as workload.

Workload

The Australian Education Union’s, State of our TAFEs survey for 2013, identified the top four issues of concern in the TAFE sector were job security, excessive admin, workload and amount of hours worked. These concerns have been exacerbated in Victoria by extensive cuts in the TAFE sector. Over 2,500 Victorian TAFE teachers have been impacted by the $300 million cuts to TAFE
in the last few years (AEU, 2013). VET practitioners in this research identified budgetary cuts as part of the added pressure on TAFE. The resultant reduction in staff and course hours has meant that VET practitioners are engaged in intensive course delivery or ‘course shaving’, so that courses can be delivered in reduced timeframes to maximise financial returns.

Practitioners felt these changes did two things; firstly, it made the task of delivering quality teaching within the time frames very pressured; secondly, it meant that many practitioners felt added pressure to spend time developing resources as unpaid work. One practitioner said:

There is not enough time to develop resources, such as video resources, that engage different types of learners. (VET practitioner)

Comparing the situation in TAFE to colleagues within the higher education division of the organisation, another practitioner said:

TAFE teachers do everything themselves, compared to higher ed. (VET practitioner)

Another commenting about TAFE workload, saying:

I am struggling to manage. I’m not sure a 12 hour work day would be enough. (VET practitioner)

While those in the classroom identified workload issues as significant risk factors in their quest to deliver quality education that acquits their sense of community obligation, for those with management roles there were additional problems:

I think the biggest change was when I went into course management. It was a culture shock! I had been teaching for so long it was easy to be isolated. There was a lot of change in some courses. I had to wade in and do some politics, some mediation. It was a huge shift.
VET practitioners who operated at the course management level identified an important distinction in their experience of increased workloads and restructuring, which left an ever decreasing number of course management staff. It did not appear to them that the workload decreased proportionately to the staffing numbers. One VET practitioner in a course management role responded to these changes:

    We had five people in course management, now we have one. I do a lot of things. You only do the same amount of work but you are doing it differently, you prioritise, you don’t do some things. I am not quite sure how it is going to impact in a few months. (VET practitioner)

Not only did course managers experience increased workload, VET practitioners at every level reported course management elements and their associated risk being pushed down to them. Extra-unpaid responsibility and coordination caused some resentment but one practitioner also felt it pushed her to ‘try and systematise a lot more’ (VET practitioner). Practitioners identified the development of online courses and learning tools as part of the organisation’s strategy to create greater efficiency and streamline systems.

Online course development elicited mixed responses from VET practitioners. Real benefits, such as allowing students to work at their pace, delivering quality course materials and using the electronic environment that students are already engaged in, were applauded by VET practitioners. The creativity and flexibility of online delivery was clearly an asset for teaching and learning for these practitioners. Practitioners were cautious about using online course delivery as a cost efficient learning panacea. It appeared that there was a collision of purpose
with the financially competitive macro risk environment in which the organisation operated (see for example, Beck, 2009b; Harvey, 2007; Marginson, 1997, 2012).

One practitioner articulated this:

There is a drive for things online; it’s about being cheaper. Students are out of sight, out of mind. It’s a way to cut down the hours and management sees it as a cheaper response. It has the potential to be really good when it is well designed but the motivation is not in terms of being at the forefront: it is more about money. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners identified many online practices as responses to the risk created by the globally competitive financial environment in education. Bliuc, Casey, Bachfischer, Goodyear and Ellis (2012) contextualise this concern:

Vocational education in Australia is faced with an increasing array of challenges that must be addressed if high standards of education and relevance to students and workplace are to be maintained. Significant amongst these are concerns about understanding the nature and role of technology in learning (p. 238).

Sometimes, according to practitioners, the systems become a risk and create a barrier to learning. One practitioner said:

E-learning can be a barrier. The process can take three weeks and they [students] are behind so they are angry and we have to deal with a lot of that stuff. Systems can be incredibly slow. Students come ready to sign up and they try but are upset if they can’t make progress quickly. (VET practitioner)

Online course delivery can become a risky enterprise, VET practitioners contended, if expert instructional design and management do not assure the quality of the online product. Practitioners felt that online learning programs were ‘not understood or valued’ as a learning tool in the first instance, which frequently increased their workloads. It appeared to practitioners that online
course delivery was as only as good as the programming and development applied to it. Williams and Goldberg (2005) confirm practitioners’ observations:

ICTs [Information and Communication Technology] are opening up a varied supply of new and powerful possibilities for learners and learning…Significantly, e-learning is turning out to be evolutionary, not revolutionary. Institutions with strategies based on quality learning outcomes are well placed to benefit from this e-learning evolution. (p. 725).

Dual sector universities that promote student pathways between their TAFE and higher education divisions are uniquely positioned to understand the importance of technology and online course usage. They are also well positioned to understand the challenges some students, particularly those with disabilities, can encounter when transitioning to higher education if transition systems are not part of an evolutionary e-learning strategy. A study by Yang, Catterall, and Davis (2013, p. 640) found that a proportion of VET students transitioning to university struggled with online learning, ‘although some students embraced online learning, more than 20 per cent of new VET students suffered from high levels of anxiety and frustration when learning online’.

VET practitioners preparing students for pathway programs are aware of the problems, which adds frustration and extra workload to their course delivery in an attempt to prepare students for the different learning demands of university. Workload issues for VET practitioners have been further compounded by the growing casualisation of the TAFE workforce. Since 1994 the cost of employees as a proportion of expenditure has ‘steadily declined in the TAFE sector’ (Kronemann, 2002, p. 2). The trend continues with a decline of 5.4% between 2012 and 2013 (NCVER, 2014a, p.1). VET practitioners within the
organisation verified the change in staffing levels and could identify some streamlining and efficiencies that provided compensation, i.e. better enrolment and computer services. They did, however, challenge these efficiency benefits for teaching staff. With the decreasing proportion of teaching staff, and the casualisation of the workforce, any benefits from systems were negated by the growing demand on their roles. The personal toll of some of these changes will be addressed in chapter seven.

**Managing workload with sessionals**

The VET workforce has traditionally comprised a relatively high proportion of sessional/casual or non-permanent staff with an estimated third of those delivering training and those employed as assessors in the non-TAFE sector (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. 85). In the TAFE sector the employment of sessional/casual staff has traditionally been high within the Productivity Commissions’ estimated 60 per cent of practitioners on non-permanent contracts. Over representation of sessional/casual staff is frequently understood as an advantage for TAFE flexibility, as the Productivity Commission described below:

Casualisation of the VET workforce is partly a response to the sector’s emphasis on industry currency and close association with industry more generally. Flexible forms of employment also enhance the ability of the VET sector to respond quickly and adequately to new or varying skills requirements, over time and in different regions. The Commission supports this flexibility and considers that caps on the engagement or deployment of casuasl are likely to be, in most circumstances, detrimental to the responsiveness of the VET sector (p. 85).

This view is reiterated in the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA, 2012, p. 71) report, Australia’s *skills and workforce development needs,*
states ‘employing sessional staff may be advantageous in the VET sector, bringing high levels of industry currency and up to date knowledge’. In addition, the TAFE Reform Panel commented that ‘there were benefits in using sessional staff’ (DEECD, 2013, p. 35). Beyond the obvious financial benefits of employing sessional/casual staff the Reform Panel identified advantages for the maintenance of industry currency for VET practitioners. Although the Productivity Commission (2011), in the *Vocational Education and Training Workforce Research Report*, conceded:

> Industry currency is not well researched or understood. Although currency is often equated with industry release, or work in industry, maintenance of currency can occur through a variety of activities. There is evidence of currency gaps in the current workforce, particularly among those who have worked full time in the VET sector for more than 10 years. Professional development systems need to identify and address these gaps (p. 85).

The *Australia’s skills and workforce development needs: Discussion paper, July 2012* (AWPA, 2012, p. 71) also noted that ‘there are potential concerns with quality and student access to casual staff’. While these concerns may be very legitimate, when viewed from the perspective of VET practitioners’ experience a plethora of additional problems and risks arose. One VET practitioner described limited access as a problem for both sessional VET practitioners and students:

> People in marketing gave out my private number and students were ringing all hours. Poor students, they assume it is a work number, they think I must be there 24/7 not that I am teaching all day and doing other jobs. (VET practitioner)

Workload issues are compounded for sessionals who may have additional employment outside the organisation. Difficulties also arose, according to VET practitioners, in the real world of recruitment where it is difficult to recruit
enough staff under any contractual arrangement in some subject areas. VET practitioners with high level qualifications and skills, for example, in areas such as finance and industrial relations are simply not impressed with the remuneration available. This can mean that those working in specific course programs are expected to cover the shortfall through extended hours due to a shortage of qualified staff. It appears more likely that the acquittal of community obligations that TAFE facilitates is a stronger motivator for highly skilled sessionals. One practitioner with specialised industry experience expressed his commitment, saying:

I have a commitment to delivering a quality experience for the student, one that means something and proves useful in the workplace and the community. That’s why we did the upgrading of the assessment tasks so that they were more connected to the everyday work experience of the student. (VET practitioner)

Valuing the community obligations VET practitioners believe TAFE represents may in turn foster quality sessional recruitment through positive recognition of the value of the VET practitioner’s professional identity. For as Elliot (2012) posits the construction of identity is not free from political and social significance. However, sessional VET practitioners occupy a risky position with insecure short-term contracts that are often not renewed until close to their expiry. One practitioner said:

I feel resentful always having to wait until the last minute to see if there are enough student numbers to have a job. (VET practitioner)

Such resentments epitomise risk theory’s notion of individualisation that makes transparent the ways in which individuals are required to construct their professional biographies around risky occupational practices. One sessional
practitioner identified the forces of individualisation, saying she ‘had to have an active role in her own viability’ (VET practitioner).

Another practitioner claimed that ‘the percentage of sessionals was a risk to the organisation’ (VET practitioner). This was largely due to the ways in which sessionals operate within the institution. They are not always available to engage in compliance work beyond their immediate obligations and their presence is often less frequent at professional development events. The situation previously described by Kroenemann (2002) appears not to have changed significantly:

Most TAFE teachers undertook professional/staff development in the previous semester. Nearly two thirds of both permanent/ongoing (72.1%) and contract teachers (72.4%) reported that they had undertaken such professional/staff development. A lower proportion of casual teachers (56.5%) reported that they had undertaken professional/staff development, but it was still the majority of this group of teachers too (p. 6).

The casualisation of the workforce creates complexity for the institution as well as VET practitioners (Productivity Commission, 2011):

…casual employment might, at times, reduce the quality of the teaching or learning experience in VET, and restrict opportunities to develop teaching and assessment ability. This supports a need for adequate professional development for casual and other non-permanent staff (p. 67).

As a group, practitioners reported significant issues with increasing administrative workloads that led them to question, in various ways, whether their professional identity was more administrative and compliance driven than teaching focused. The arrangements under which sessional staff operated compounded the anxiety practitioners expressed with increasing workload.
VET practitioners are part of a complex system that requires issues of workload to be addressed at all levels. Commentary on VET practitioners and the TAFE sector has become expansive in the last decade whereas Beddie, Creaser, Hargeaves and Ong (2014) point out that:

The role of employers appears less scrutinised but just as significant. The role of employers is crucial—in the workplace and in partnership with schools, VET institutions, universities and research organisations. Australian enterprise has still to meet the challenge of instilling stronger management and leadership qualities in its workforce (p. 28).

VET practitioners resisted the discourse that they should be the sole addressees of risk in what is a globally competitive education and training sector in an economic environment over which they had little control. For many it was now timely that employers in industry experienced the same level of scrutiny and shared the risk associated with workforce skills development.

**Conclusion**

Beck’s (2009b, p. 3) claim that ‘everyone poses more or less of a risk for everyone else’ has theoretical and explanatory power when seen through the lens of VET practitioners in this research. A compounding complexity emerges for practitioners when this premise is considered concurrently with VET practitioners’ commitment to TAFE’s community obligations. The contradiction becomes more evident when the acquittal of these community obligations is intrinsically connected to notions of collaboration and educational collegiality for practitioners.
VET practitioners in this dual sector organisation have unwittingly become the ‘central addressees’ for risk through the compliance systems, audit practices and workload increases that accompany a competitive globalised education sector. Escalating risk exposure plays out through increasing compliance burdens and the rigours of audit trail paperwork and practices. Such changes are not without challenge as VET practitioners respond to audit and compliance requirements challenging the notion of ‘expert’ and drawing collective practices such as moderation and validation around them to diffuse, where possible, their exposure to risk.

The impact of TAFE cuts in the last decade continue to reverberate through dual sector organisations and drive a trend within them to reduce their TAFE divisions. Funding changes that have reduced the delivery dollars to TAFE institutions have also resulted in less support for the community obligation work that TAFE has traditionally provided. VET practitioners in this research are subject to multiple pressures that have the potential to change the nature of their role and professional identity. Nonetheless, their tenacious commitment to the fundamental importance of vocational education for the individual, the community and society continues to drive their practice. The impact on VET practitioners as individuals operating in a complex and demanding system will be examined in chapter seven.
CHAPTER SEVEN: Paying the price for teaching in TAFE

**Introduction**

VET practitioners inhabit a point of convergence for the global and institutional pressures that currently operate in tertiary education. For practitioners in this research, keeping a balance between the pressures of the compliance workload, the community’s and their own expectations came at a personal price.

This chapter examines a number of risks VET practitioners confront and the personal price they can incur. An examination of the research data at the micro level indicates that there are tensions between practitioners’ commitment to TAFE’s community obligations and the personal price and impact on their everyday experience as VET practitioners. To understand these tensions this chapter will examine the specific impacts of risk, as they effect identity formation, the complexity of the VET practitioner role, and the value of VET practice within a dual sector organisation.

**Forming a VET practitioner identity**

Unsurprisingly, VET practitioners identified one of the primary costs of their role as the significant level of stress they experienced. They reported being ‘stressed and time poor’ struggled to manage the stress of meeting the demands of ongoing professional competency as outlined in training packages, as well as the industry and subject matter currency that are demanded by a knowledge society (VET practitioner). Hargreaves (2003, 2011) confirms that the demands of a knowledge driven society are increasing.
Compounding an already complex role, were unrealistic demands, as one VET practitioner explained thus:

Some VET practitioner position descriptions are impossible. I know people who have position descriptions that are absolutely impossible to meet. The workload is not realistic. You are setting people up for failure and even if you put in 12 hours a day you couldn't keep up. It results in burnout and health issues. (VET practitioner)

Another practitioner weighed up the risk and cost to her mental and physical health, during a particularly difficult restructure within the organisation, and decided it was time to move on. The practitioner didn’t move far, just across the road to the higher education division of the organisation, and took up a role creating online resources. People noticed the change in her appearance and manner almost immediately:

My kids noticed the difference after I moved to higher education. They commented that I didn’t look so stressed anymore. (VET practitioner)

Others noticed too and started commenting to her that she:

Looked fantastic. They said the change has made a real difference to my stress levels. I certainly feel that. (VET practitioner)

Even though the practitioner moved within the same dual sector organisation, her experience of the TAFE division was much more unsettling. Other practitioners who worked across higher education and/or industry made similar comments. Such comments appeared to be informed by the specific context of an unstable TAFE division that produced inherent risks in their role and identity as VET practitioners. Perceptions of occupying a less strategically significant
place in an organisation that was subject to capricious workforce, industry and government imperatives permeated practitioners’ responses.

Practitioners were very quick to point out that their colleagues in higher education were facing a different set of stressors relating to increased student teaching workloads, casualisation, work intensification, expanding productivity demands for research income and publication (see Maten, 2011; Hil, 2012; Parr, 2014) bibliographics and ‘KPIs [key performance indicators] as governance tools for auditing’ (Aspromourgos, 2014, p. 83). It should also be noted that since these interviews were completed the policy direction of the Federal Government has compounded the existing uncertainty and direction of higher education in Australia (see Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008; Moodie, 2012; Ireland, 2014; Withers, 2014).

Nonetheless, the unique nature and context of a TAFE division in a dual sector organisation appeared to raise anxiety for practitioners about their role and professional identity. Many practitioners expressed this anxiety as a personal cost related to more than workload. A VET practitioner expressed the feeling as one of ‘not being valued as a professional VET practitioner, and not being consulted’ about policy decisions, nor ‘being understood by higher education management’ in a dual sector organisation (VET practitioner). Smith and Keating’s research (2003) supports VET practitioners’ assertions that the complexity of the VET sector means that it is not well understood by people working in the higher education system. One practitioner felt not being valued
went further than the complexity of the system, and identified the cost of working in a dual sector organisation as needing to manage disparagement:

A lot in higher education turn their noses down at the VET sector. It’s a shame, it shouldn't be that way. (VET practitioner)

Complexity and a lack of clarity about the nature of their teaching practice heightened the sense of risk, anxiety and uncertainty for VET practitioners in relation to their professional identity, as it is constructed within the organisation. Identity is constructed within complex social and personal dimensions, ‘teacher identity is anchored in the intersection of the individual teacher's educational beliefs and practices, institutional policies, sectoral boundaries, and the socio-cultural, economic and political context in which their profession is embedded’ (Tran & Nguyen, 2013, p. 199). VET practitioners expressed the view that the dual sector context in which they constructed their professional identity was a divided and sometimes disparaging one.

This research has focused on the context in which VET practitioners construct their professional identity and therefore has reflected practitioners’ use of ‘role’ as a way to describe their experience. The use of the term by practitioners was not necessarily a corollary of a claim to particularly essentialist or static concepts of ‘role theory’ (see Davies & Harre, 1990; Stryker & Burke, 2000) as it was apparent that practitioners engaged with a variety of identity concepts under the umbrella of ‘role’. While in-depth developments of theories of identity are beyond the scope and space of this research, approaches to identity could be identified on reflection on the data provided by practitioners. Some of these reflections alluded to notions of identity capital (see for example, Cote & Levine,
2002; Cote & Schwartz, 2002) when practitioners recounted interactions with refugee students who possessed little of mainstream societies capital. In addition, their negotiation or interaction with a range of different actors across the dual sector organisation might also be understood through the original conceptualisation of Stryker’s (1968) and Stryker and Burke’s (2000) process of identity negotiation.

Davies and Harre’s (1990) instructional work on ‘positioning’ through the discursive production of the self may also be a useful approach to elucidating the ways in which VET practitioners ‘position’ themselves and made meaning of their experience:

An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is, always [is] an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives (p.47).

This concept of discursive production of the self exposes the mechanisms by which the self is negotiated and reformed in interactions. It highlights the utility of discursive practices as a way of moving beyond understandings of role theory (Davies & Harre, 1990):

In moving from the use of role to position as the central organising concept for analysing how it is that people do being a person, we have moved to another conception of the relation between people and their conversations. In role-theory the person is always separable from the various roles that they take up; any particular conversation is understood in terms of someone taking on a certain role. The words that are spoken are to some extent dictated by the role and are to be interpreted in these terms. With positioning, the focus is on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in
certain ways and yet at the same time is a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions (p. 62).

Identity has many theoretical lenses from which the experiences of VET practitioners can be viewed, along with Davies and Harre’s (1990, p. 46) concept of positioning, they ‘conjure up a ‘fleeting panorama’ of ‘Meadian ‘me’s’.

For practitioners the negotiation with the notion of ‘role’, whatever the theoretical underpinning, remained problematic, as many iterations of the VET practitioner role appeared to compete for their attention. Emerging paradigms of the ‘new VET Professional’ identifies roles that is industry based and where the casualisation of the practitioner role is seen as a positive measure to ensure industry currency. VET practitioners identified a potential risk to course quality that exists in this casualised model. They pointed to the risk to quality course delivery by the increasing casualisation of staffing that usually resulted in a decrease in overall hours. One sessional practitioner complained that, ‘20 hours a week is not enough’ to meet all the compliance requirements (VET practitioner). The impact for practitioners was that more of the administrative workload fell to those with fulltime contracts or was simply not done or done inadequately.

Smith and Keating (2003, p. 230) contended that for VET practitioners ‘the complexity of the VET sector is an issue, and defining the role of a VET practitioner is not as easy as defining the role of a [school] teacher’. Nonetheless, for these VET practitioners managing the complexity and tension between competing demands, diverse stakeholder views and an ambiguous identity were part of the everyday ‘price’ of fulfilling their commitment to
TAFE’s community obligations. While VET practitioners contended with a level of ambiguity in their experience, they were quick to identify the environment and sector in which they worked as a key contributor to this ambiguity. Contending with this specific organisational ambiguity therefore, was yet another challenge for VET practitioners as they attempted to construct their professional identities. In fact, it appeared that the difficulty of working in the dual sector tested VET practitioners’ commitment to ‘teaching in TAFE’ and required a strong identification with the role and its community obligations (see for example, Davids, 2008; Harris, Simons & Clayton, 2005; Bretherton, 2011).

While VET practitioners in this research may have many identities, as do other members of the community, their VET practitioner identity appears to have become chronically ambiguous and unstable given continuing reforms in the sector. Practitioners were therefore exposed to significant wellbeing implications due to the ambiguity they must contend with in their professional roles. Such ambiguity amplifies the risk of significant health issues. Research conducted by Frone, Russell and Cooper (1995, p. 1) found ‘high levels of job involvement [commitment] exacerbated the relationship between role ambiguity and physical health, role ambiguity and heavy alcohol use, and work pressure and heavy alcohol use’. Stressful working environments may also lead to a range of mental health and wellbeing risks for the individual such as depression and anxiety (Beyond Blue, 2014). Stress is also indicated as a factor in many illnesses due the effect it produces on the body’s defence systems (Cohen et al., 2012). VET practitioners in this research firmly believed that there were wellbeing risks associated with the VET practitioner role. They identified these as significant
concomitant impacts on personal wellbeing, expressed as ‘stress and feeling stressed’ (VET practitioner), and feeling ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘unable to keep up with workplace demands’ (VET practitioner). Practitioners and the organisation were both at substantial risk given these issues. The organisation’s risk included reputational damage and potential financial loss should it be liable for breaches of worker’s occupational health and safety (Occupational Health & Safety Regulations, 2007). Beyond these concerns was the organisation’s fundamental duty of care for their staff.

VET practitioners’ commitment to TAFE’s community obligations, juxtaposed against the ambiguity inherent in their demanding professional roles, generated conditions that potentially could place their wellbeing at risk, as indicated above. The lack of role clarity for VET practitioners contributed to the frustration they reported as they examined their particularly risky position within the TAFE division of a dual sector organisation.

The complexity and ambiguity in the role of a VET practitioner is perhaps epitomised by the lack of consistent naming protocols for those teaching in vocational education. In this dual sector organisation the descriptor ‘teacher’ was used for TAFE teaching staff and ‘lecturer’ for higher education staff. However, while campus based VET teaching staff tended to use the term ‘teacher’ in TAFE, when it came to industry based programs staff may be identified as ‘facilitators’, unless they were employed directly by industry and might then be called ‘trainers’. In addition, VET practitioners had particular definitions of
their own, ‘we always say there are trainers, teachers and VET practitioners. I always think of myself as a practitioner’ (VET practitioner).

It is clear that existing regulatory frameworks and practices appear to have been unsuccessful in determining a singular VET practitioner identity and designation. Smith (2001) concludes that the lack of a universally agreed term for a VET practitioner is a problem:

The term ‘practitioner’ means little and is confusing to non-experts in VET. ‘Teacher’ and ‘trainer’ each lack attractiveness to people in particular contexts. ‘Facilitator’ has some support, but like ‘practitioner’ has a range of meanings. While this issue is unresolved, it is difficult to market the job of VET practitioner (p. 10).

It may seem superficial or pedantic to focus concern on the naming protocols of VET practitioners. However, language was important for VET practitioners and is one of the symbols through which social interaction and meaning is mediated (see for example, Mead, 1967; Blumer, 1962; Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). While this research is not an investigation of identity formation per se, nor does it offer a critique of the many theoretical standpoints that can be taken to the subject of identity, the following observations can be made.

Engaging the lens of symbolic interactionism, pioneered by Mead (1967) provides a way of apprehending notions of individual engagement in an internal dialogue with the individualised self with ‘I’ as subject and the socialised ‘Me’ as object (Blumer, 1962; Wallace & Wolf, 1986). In the concept of symbolic interactionism such a process can be used to indicate the ways in which an
individual practitioner can ‘act socially toward him or herself as he or she might toward others’ (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012, p. 689).

Identity formation in Meadian based theories can be interpreted to presuppose VET practitioners’ internalisation of their own behaviour in comparison to the behaviour of others in related positions and roles. ‘One pursues opportunities to enact one’s claimed identities and thereby validates them for oneself and for others’ (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 108). Identity then becomes the means by which VET practitioners are able to enact self and subjective meaning in their professional roles (see for example, Stets, 2006; Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). However, in an ambiguous environment identity becomes more difficult to establish and validate, as one practitioner said:

> It is just a very uncertain environment. It is hard to know how to have a good sense of who I am and how I fit. I feel there is no stability. You are not sure that if you go through the hoops will you still have a job. (VET practitioner)

Another said:

> Our understanding of what we are is quite muddy. When you look at all the VET practitioner qualifications, what are they are actually saying about your role? How do we interpret our role? It has changed enormously over time. (VET practitioner)

Built on Meadian theoretical traditions, Goffman’s (1957, 1983) dramatutalogical analogy provides further insight into the processes of identity through the ‘performance’ of VET practitioners. Identity as a VET practitioner requires a ‘performance’ of that identity using Goffman’s stage analogy’s ‘front or back of house’ contexts. Positive responses from practitioners to the notion of their identity can be understood as informed by clear ‘back of house’ meanings founded on their
semiotic mediation of TAFE’s unique community obligations and values. The commitment to community obligations is long standing as Chappell’s (2001, p. 33) research more than a decade ago confirms, ‘TAFE teachers continue to identify with the discourses of public service’ and ‘overwhelmingly speak of equity, fairness, social justice and public access rather than profit, competition, efficiency and entrepreneurial activity when ascribing their work’.

The underpinning discursive meaning making that aligns with TAFE’s unique community obligations is mediated in various ways by VET practitioners as ‘front of house’ or ‘me’ interactions and performances within the organisation. This was illustrated by a practitioner who said:

You have to be pragmatic, you have to be prepared to say the right things in meetings. “Oh wonderful, we have more things on line”, and then go away and think about how we can make these things work.

(VET practitioner)

The constant interplay and interaction of meaning making for the individual practitioner occurs through monitoring and reviewing the social environment in relation to their internal sense of self as a VET practitioner. The research findings highlighted the effects on practitioners of an unstable TAFE division within an increasingly competitive dual sector organisation. These effects can be seen in heightened vigilance, constant monitoring, and rapid and repeated meaning making by practitioners. The responses of these practitioners who reported being ‘stressed’ and ‘anxious’ regarding their professional identity could be interpreted through median notions of the self (VET practitioner).
A critical factor contributing to the stress and anxiety identified by these VET practitioners appeared to be the link between meanings of ‘VET practitioner identity’ and the performance that identity required. One VET practitioner reported that, ‘I often think that their [the organisation] idea of my identity is not my idea, not when they determine the role’ (VET practitioner). VET practitioners managed the dilemma of identity and related stress by engaging together in ‘meaning making discourses’ as a means of negotiating their identity within the organisation and to manage the inherent risk in their roles (see for example, Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Beck, 1992, 2000b, 2009a; Chappell, 2001; Katovich & Maines, 2003).

VET practitioners had a great deal to say about their place as VET practitioners as well as how they worked out ‘what it is to be a teacher in the TAFE division’ of a dual sector organisation (VET practitioner). Their performance as VET practitioners, therefore, can be seen as an outworking of the dynamic quest for expression of the self through social interaction. There were, nevertheless, positive as well as negative outcomes for practitioners. One practitioner spoke about the impact of ‘performing’ in a positive environment using common meanings and practices that supported practitioner performance:

It’s positive. Working with the right people in the team there is a lot of [personal] growth and cooperation. We listen to the students and ensure we are all working to the same standards and meanings…tailoring learning to their needs. (VET practitioner)

Concomitantly, VET practitioners identified the inherent risk of ‘performance’ when it became ‘performative’ as a result of the organisation’s efforts to minimise meso and macro risk (see Ball, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Chappell, 2001; White, 2010;
Beck, 2000b). Such performativity impeded their capacity to live out their own self-conception (see for example, Fejes & Kopsen, 2014). The constant pressure and continuing flow of risk from the globalised education environment to the meso level organisation created compounding pressure in which performativity increased. For VET practitioners, increased performativity was associated with burgeoning compliance practices. Under these pressures of expanding compliance requirements practitioners reported little time for creativity, effectively stifling innovation. One practitioner said, ‘I found the compliance systems and administrative work got in the way of the teaching, development and innovation side of things all the time’ (VET practitioner).

A significant point of connection with Beck’s theories comes through the practice of reflexivity. Clearly, from the lens of risk, the structures of society are under challenge from the globalised forces of risk that results from reflexive modernity (Giddens, 1999; Beck, 2000, 2009a). Beck’s (1992, 1994, 1999, 2000b, 2009a) use of reflexivity provides insight into the ways in which an individual’s identity formation, in the 21st century, is permeated by risk. Further, for VET practitioners the process of reflexivity brings with it a symbiotic escalation of risk identification, it also individualises that risk. The reflexive process in Beck’s risk theory coalesces with notions of identity formation developed by Weigert and Gecas (2003) highlighting the integral role that reflexivity plays in the internal process and dialogue of identity formation. Burke and Reitzes (1981; 1991) concur that reflexivity is a common aspect of Meadian theorists’ attributes of identity. VET practitioners repeatedly engaged in reflexive practice as a way
in which to manage their contested identity in an environment where there was increasing exposure to risk.

While Meadian based theories highlight the process of identity formation, adding the lens of Beck’s (1992, 2000b, 2009a) risk theory has explanatory cogency for the frustration VET practitioners expressed in this research. Their identity as VET practitioners appeared compressed between their commitment to the unique community obligations of TAFE and the contending discordant and performative requirements of an organisation constricted itself by the forces of global or macro risk. One VET practitioner expressed it this way:

There is a tension here with the market and what the organisation can deliver. Big bureaucratic organisations can be inflexible …I have a commitment to delivering a quality experience for the student. (VET practitioner)

The process of reflexivity provides a point of connection for VET practitioners’ everyday symbolic interactions with the backdrop of Beck’s theory of risk. Reflexivity sensitises VET practitioners to the risks inherent in their role and identity formation. These risks were negotiated against a background of global and organisational forces that create stress, pressure and uncertainty in their role.

There are many ways to view and analyse the nature of VET practice within dual sector organisations, each with their own merits. Nonetheless, Beck’s (1992, 2000b, 2009a) lens of risk theory is informative. Risk operates at a fundamental level in VET practitioners’ identity bringing with it the pressures of performativity and ultimately the potential of a changed identity. The global risk
forces that impact the organisation cascade into VET practice recasting VET practitioner identity as a marketised, commercial and performative one.

**Complex VET practitioner identity**

One of the significant differences in the TAFE sector, when compared to other areas of education, is that many VET practitioners retain a strong sense of professional identity, connection and experience in the industry and role from which they have come. This was seen in the ways in which VET practitioners variously described other occupational identities for themselves. One practitioner said:

I’m an IT professional by training. (VET practitioner)

Another identified a specific background, saying:

I have a background in industry project management. (VET practitioner)

In addition, industry situated practitioners collaborating with TAFE through commercial workplace programs may hold primary identities as human resource professionals, learning and development managers or management professionals. There was no simple homogeneous identity of ‘teacher’ within this diversity of professional backgrounds; rather, they reflected complex identities that have diverse professional and trade underpinnings (see for example, Harris, Simons & Clayton, 2005; Smith 2001; Productivity Commission, 2011).

A Swedish study by Fejes and Kopsen (2014, p. 265) illustrates the ways in which vocational teachers who managed to ‘balance their teacher identities with
their occupational identities by maintaining their participation in the different communities seem to be the best prepared to teach their vocational subjects’. Clearly, the maintenance of occupational identities also provides a necessary avenue for skills and knowledge currency that are a fundamental compliance component for VET teaching (see for example, Productivity Commission, 2011; AWPA, 2012; ASQA, 2015a, 2015b). Continuing affiliations and memberships of professional and trade associations assisted practitioners to remain cognisant of the changes and developments in their area of subject matter expertise. Obviously, professional and compliance advantages existed for VET practitioners through maintaining the currency skills and knowledge within their occupational identity that was required by the organisation. The difficulty for some VET practitioners related to their capacity to engage adequately in professional development in their area of subject matter expertise, given their existing workloads. Nonetheless, when viewed through the lens of risk they also functioned as a way to solidify notions of alternate identities, with which to manage risk.

VET practitioners’ sensitivity to the unstable nature of the sector can be glimpsed through their self-identification as professionals, when they claimed identities saying, ‘I am an IT professional,’ (VET practitioner). Still others claimed project management or information technology systems backgrounds as indicated above. Such strong professional identifications potentially revealed more than their subject matter expertise and credentials. It appeared that they were broadening their identities in response to the ambiguity in their role and risky position as VET practitioners. Such broadening of their identity also served to provide some
insulation against the many cuts and restructures that occur within the organisation. Consequently, evoking existing professional identities allowed practitioners to construct themselves as less vulnerable and should their TAFE role cease they had ‘other professions and experience to fall back on’ (VET practitioner). VET practitioner oscillation within various identities required a constant ‘iterative interplay between people in interaction and the social context’ (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012, p. 692). These oscillations required constant vigilance and emotional energy, and were part of the ‘price of teaching in TAFE’ (VET practitioner).

Clearly, the social environment and interactions of VET practitioners also provided mechanisms through which practitioners developed an understanding of their VET practitioner identity and role in the organisation. Chappell (2001, p. 25) concludes that to function in a social environment one must have a concept of it, in ‘order to think meaningfully about it’. In addition, Chappell identifies the ways in which the construction of social meaning within a shared environment is identity forming and impacts the workplace.

An individual’s identification with shared social meanings constitutes identity formation and can be seen as a process of reality construction through which social actors interpret particular events, actions or situations in distinctive ways. It therefore provides a mechanism by which individuals can make sense of their social practices including those practices conducted at work (p. 25).

One of the ways that VET practitioners engaged in this shared environment was through communities of practice, both formal and informal. Communities of practice are not new; they have been operating throughout human history, where individuals come together to share information and learn how to do some aspect of
the work, or build identity as members of a work community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A leading proponent of communities of practice, Wenger (2015), provides the following description:

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (p. 1).

These processes were not recognised as events other than informal gatherings among people until the value of these activities were conceptualised and understood as significant learning and development opportunities (Blankenship & Ruona, 2009; Ellinger, 2005). Recent advances in information and communications technology have added significant capacity for communities of practice to go beyond the limitations of location. Rather than needing face-to-face interactions communities of practice are now able to bring together practitioners working across the globe. Practitioners have the opportunity to be exposed to VET practitioners in local, national and international settings.

Practitioners within the organisation engaged in a wide variety of activities that constitute communities of practice. These ranged from course moderation groups to those specifically set up as communities of practice in subject areas to promote VET practice, knowledge and skill development. For practitioners, the ability to join a dialogue with colleagues, who constructed different meanings of their situation, encouraged ‘reflexive teaching practice’ and reflection on their identity as
VET practitioners (VET practitioner). For many practitioners these activities acted as compensating factors for some of the difficulties of ‘teaching in TAFE’. Opportunities to engage in communities of practice provided VET practitioners with a space within which to experiment with new identities that were frequently beyond the reach of the organisation. Communities of practice have previously been identified as mechanisms to ‘regularize the semiotic means for new identities and activities that lie beyond existing structures of power’ (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 135). VET practitioners appropriated a self-directed space that was free from the influence of management which, in other circumstances, could be used by the organisation as a tool of control. Significantly in this research VET practitioners reported that their engagement in communities of practice supported their collective commitment to TAFE’s community obligations. Their collective experience also provided a mechanism that reduced risk through agreed meaning making and the development of collective strategies to deal with organisational risk.

VET practitioners’ day-to-day experiences also highlight the interactions between concepts of individual agency and the power of structures within which individuals operate. The possibility of personal agency make identity and identity processes important ‘not only in the lives of individuals, but in the course of social change’ (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 116). The capacity of individual VET practitioners to exercise their agency against powerful institutional and global structures is therefore a significant issue, although notions of ‘agency and structure’ have caused debate in sociological theory.
The fundamental problems within this debate are the ways in which structures are determined or created; the ways in which structures determine individual actions; and where the limits of individual VET practitioners’ capacity to act independently can be drawn. Theorists take a number of positions within this debate ranging from questioning the existence of social structures and society (Latour, 2005), classical functionalist interpretations where the actions of individuals are of less importance (Durkheim, 1964; Parsons, 1968), and a middle ground that attempts to highlight the relationship between agency and structure. The focus for theorists taking the middle ground is the impact agency and structure have on each other (Giddens, 1984; Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

While this research acknowledges the ‘agency verses structure’ debate, the theoretical lens of risk transforms the place of structure and institutions as reflexive modernisation operates to challenge their power from within (Giddens, 1999; Beck, 2000b, 2009a). Such an environment amplifies risk that drives the symbiotic process whereby institutions must constantly manage the boundaries of individual agency that are a result of dynamic and shifting risk forces. VET practitioners in this research therefore continued to find opportunity to exercise their agency, particularly in collective strategies that enhanced their commitment to social change through acquitting TAFE’s community obligations. Practitioners reported a sense of their own agency within the confines of the organisations requirements. One practitioner who had responsibility for the development and management of courses said:

I have always been a bit of a person who does things first and asks permission later. This doesn’t fit well with the organisation but they didn’t ask me to leave. It was about the way I managed courses and the
way we [practitioner’s staff] were all flexible with industry clients that they found hard’ (VET practitioner).

VET practitioners faced additional challenges from the risk management requirements of training packages and those of new technology. These challenges increase stress as previous research indicates (Dempsey, 2013):

Some of the challenges identified by trainers included the capacity to reflect the requirements of National Training Packages and meet the needs of diverse learners and the use of new technology. They identified increased stress levels and pressure of time constraints to produce results (p. 3).

In addition, VET practice now also blurs the traditional divide of school and VET (see for example, Moodie, Wheelahan, Billett and Kelly). Practitioners are now assumed to have the skills sets and capacity to teach across a diverse range of sectors. Moreover, the lack of clarity in VET practitioners’ role is reflected in the educational qualification minimum standard, the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Practitioners reported that the lack of clarity about their role was reflected in the entry level of training they required, which they felt was ‘not sufficient’ (VET practitioner). Predictably, as with so much within the VET sector, debate and contest surrounds the adequacy of this qualification for the role (see for example, Clayton, Meyers, Bateman, & Bluer, 2010; Davids, 2008; Guthrie, 2010a, 2010b; Hodge, 2014; Karmel, 2011). The issue is discussed in more detail in chapter eight.

At the macro level these tensions and contradictions are compounded by the complexity of a federal system based on government agreements, with multiple layers of decision-making and widely varying practices. The result is ‘a very
dynamic system’ which is ‘inherently unstable’ (Smith & Keating 2003, p.51). The fractious nature of the sector compounds the stress and personal cost for practitioners. On the one hand, they promote the unique value of TAFE in the community; on the other, they contend with global education risk forces and the uncertain value of their professional role and identity. Nonetheless, one practitioner identified the intrinsic reward the role provided as a counterbalance to the personal ‘price paid for teaching in TAFE’, saying, ‘being a VET teacher to me is a calling, you have someone’s life in your hands’ (VET practitioner). Practitioners were not convinced that the price they paid was recognised or valued.

Valuing VET practice

VET stakeholders include government, industry, RTOs, students, and local communities, which inevitably gave rise to tensions for practitioners in meeting the different and sometimes conflicting needs and expectations of these stakeholders (see for example, Chappell, Hawke Rhodes, & Solomon, 2003). In addition, as has been indicated, there exists considerable diversity amongst VET practitioners themselves. This diversity of needs and expectations have been reflected for some time in a multiplicity of purposes, values, practices, beliefs, identities, and organisational norms and cultures, producing what Down (2003, p. 13) called ‘multi-voicedness’. One of the costs identified by VET practitioners of this ‘multi-voiced’ system is that they have become sidelined in the processes of VET reform. They see their position as outside those of influence in the reform process.
One VET practitioner spoke about this experience in terms of a circle of influence:

The circle of influence means you control what is in the middle. Then there are things outside your control, coming down from the manager and the big picture from the organisation and the sector. You cannot influence what is outside your personal circle of control. You need to be resourceful because you can't change those things that are out of your circle of influence. (VET practitioner)

This research suggests that VET practitioners also experienced considerable disempowerment as part of the cost of working in a dual sector environment. A practitioner spoke of years of experience in the dual sector:

In stand-alone TAFE everyone works together. In the dual sector we are not like that, higher education takes priority over everything. I have been in the dual sector for more than 20 years. I know how it works. (VET practitioner)

Another practitioner said:

You could create a real opportunity to work together. The irony is that some of the stand-alone universities are teaming up with TAFE and some have private RTO arms. (VET practitioner)

Another practitioner lamented this lack of influence, saying:

Compliance is the only thing I have influence over, the cost I don't have much say about and can't do much about anything else’. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners expressed frustration that they were caught in a symbiotic cycle, propping up structures that created further risk and stress. Practitioners confirmed a loss of empowerment through the implementation of competency-based curriculum reform that continues to impact the experience of these VET
practitioners. Competency based reforms resulted in the authority of practitioners to make decisions from their base of subject and professional expertise being subordinated and displaced (see Jackson, 1995). CBT systems construct competency documents that are deemed ‘objective’ while VET practitioner perspectives are understood as reflecting ‘vested interests’ and by implication subjective and less reliable. VET practitioners reported that the reification of documented competency standards, as the only authorised basis for content decision-making, was constricting. One practitioner said:

No-one is seeing it as a whole package or what the students should be able to do. We need to spend more time looking at the spirit of the documents and seeing how best we can meet the student’s need and cover that. (VET practitioner)

This view was one that practitioners regularly reinforced when discussing the nature of competency based training in this research. It is supported by a study conducted a decade ago where practitioners claimed that there had been an over-emphasis on training over a broader notion of education, and many wanted a broader view of education in VET (see Harris, Simons & Clayton, 2005). In addition, the construction of competencies has an impact on the development of vocational aspirations for students is supported by previous research (Bretherton, 2011):

A major criticism of VET is that when the ‘meaning’ of VET (the broader occupational value of skills acquired) is lost, the value of the training acquired is diminished. The intense and narrow focus on competency and ‘tasks’, it is argued, has fragmented the potential vocation that might emerge, because competency alone offers no scope for this expansion (p. 22).
VET practitioners expressed frustration that their voices are lost in these debates as they have significant practice knowledge and wisdom to add, as one practitioner said:

A lot of the ways in which units of competence are developed are driven from the top down. The practitioner’s voice is not loud in issues of the breadth of occupational skills and knowledge as a whole. In the last few years it has become very frustrating. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners have valuable insight and knowledge of the cost of macro and meso level policy changes on their practice and on student outcomes. Down (2003, p. 18) supports the notion that VET practitioner knowledge is part of the ‘collective wisdom’ of VET. Regrettably, this was not the experience in the TAFE division for the practitioner who moved from TAFE to higher education in the organisation. The acknowledgement of her insight in the higher education arena made her ‘feel more valued in higher education than it had been in the TAFE’ division of the dual sector organisation (VET practitioner).

These practitioner responses highlight some of the risks and costs associated with VET practice, which are the ‘private side of globalisation’ in a risk society. They reflect weakened collective and traditional teaching roles and institutions creating an amplification of risk for the individual practitioner (see Beck, 1992).

Some VET practitioners responded to this increasing risk exposure and personal cost by moving away from direct practice. One VET practitioner who had just moved to a management role, with limited teaching, explained:

I am really an educator at the core but I didn’t want to teach in TAFE anymore. I wasn’t bitter but I don't want to teach all the time. I want to help people get the outcomes. I will fight tooth and nail to get a better
system for students. I didn’t take the manager’s job because I wanted to be sitting in front of a spreadsheet every day. I love people and I wanted to be a teacher but to be a teacher is not that easy anymore. (VET practitioner).

Practitioners also responded to increasing risk by passing up promotional opportunities that they saw as too personally costly and risky:

They offered the course manager role to me but I said, ‘no I don’t want it’. No one took it, and then another VET practitioner said she would do it for three months and they mucked around with her and she said, “no more”. So we were bearing the brunt of compliance requirements without any support but no one would take on the manager’s role. (VET practitioner)

Added to the difficulties of creating a professional identity as a VET practitioner were the risks and stress of contending with the sense of having a low status in the education sector. Traditionally, technical colleges’ pioneered vocational training where trades and technical skill based training was delivered (Murray-Smith, 1956). The division that has developed between theoretical and practical learning has been constructed in ways that create the perception of a hierarchy of greater status and value for theoretical learning typically associated with higher education and universities (see for example, Wheelahan, Leahy, Fredman, Moodie, Arkoudis, & Bexley, 2012; Wheelahan, 2014). This discourse has meant that VET practice has been constructed as part of a lower status endeavour reflecting the traditionally low status of the occupations in the sector. As supported by Dempsey’s (2013) research:

Thus, while in practice vocational education comprises trade and technical qualifications, as well as professional and post-professional qualifications, it is typically equated with the former as a lower status form of education (p. 28).
Faced with these difficulties, VET practitioners’ were still able to identify the factors that made it possible for them to continue in their unique role and find fulfilment in doing so. Practitioners worked hard to balance the risks and personal costs of their role with the value they believed it brought to individual students and the community.

Practitioners reported a sense of personal satisfaction when they reflected on their interactions with students in the task of learning:

I love the interaction to get students involved even though the reporting on it, dotting the ‘i’s and crossing the ‘t’s, is onerous. (VET practitioner)

Another said:

The actual face-to-face with students is the nice part of teaching.

Another commented:

I just think the more experience and the more cohorts and the more courses that you can expose yourself to, the more you grow as an educator. You learn just as much from them as they learn from you. (VET practitioner)

In contrast, practitioners were quite scathing of colleagues whom they believed were not committed to their role and community obligation or did not possess the required competencies. A practitioner commented on colleagues:

He [VET colleague] is very business minded, operates at a very professional level but I can't see that everywhere. No one challenges or provides feedback. Some teachers are putting in 50% while others are putting in 100%. (VET practitioner)
Another said:

There is no consequence if you are not good at something. That also makes you feel devalued, working alongside colleagues that are not competent. No one manages other’s underperformance. Other people are left to pick up their work or it just doesn't get done. (VET practitioner)

There was a considerable irony in the fact that practitioners spent so much of their time in the pursuit of compliance requirements, measures and accountabilities and yet they reported fundamental approaches to performance management were either inadequate or non-existent. The strong focus on teaching and content-based workforce development within the sector and the organisation appeared to work against some of the most basic performance management practices (see DEECD, 2013).

In this way it is possible to identify practitioners as more or less of a risk to each other using Beck’s (2009b) theory of risk. In addition, risk generated through inadequate management practices constituted a reputational risk for the organisation (see for example, Power, Scheytt, Soin & Sahlin, 2009). As a dual sector organisation each division of the organisation had the capacity to impact the other. Diminishing of the reputation of one division of the organisation through poor performance management or other management processes could produce negative results in both. The consequences of these risks manifested in increased workload, stress and personal resentment. One practitioner explained that the organisation was risk averse given its past experience:

The organisation has internal audits. They audit to death because of past experience. This is because the worst case scenario might be a course shut down, and I understand a course was shut down before I came to the organisation. It was because of compliance issues.
Basically the training delivery was good but their compliance documents were no good. (VET practitioner)

For VET practitioners these risks were viewed with student outcomes as a priority. A study conducted by Davids (2008) on lead teachers in Queensland confirms that VET practitioner identity is aligned to meaning at work and a sense of connection to community. VET practitioner’s commitment to VET as a vehicle for positive student outcomes is supported by research that consistently demonstrates the significance of VET for early school leavers. Lee and Coelli (2010) showed that Certificates I and II are most beneficial, in terms of labour market outcomes, to school leavers. The development of literacy and numeracy skills through VET training is fundamental to these outcomes.

Practitioners’ belief that these skills provide significant employment advantages are demonstrated in research findings. For example, Shomos (2010) demonstrated that an improvement in literacy and numeracy skills from level one (low) to level three (required for effective functioning in a complex environment) were correlated to an increase in hourly wage rates of approximately 25 to 30 per cent. Shomos and Forbes’ research (2014) also confirms VET practitioners’ assertions that tertiary education increases employment and wellbeing outcomes.

Additionally, NCVER’s (2014) Student Outcomes Survey quantifies a number of the benefits for students that VET practitioners associated with undertaking VET. For example, in 2014:
• 14.8% of graduates were employed at a higher skill level after training.
• 72.5% of graduates employed after training received at least one job-related benefit.
• 9.4% of module completers were employed at a higher skill level after training.
• 59.7% of graduates had an improved employment status after training.
• 77.6% of graduates were employed after training (p. 8).

Moreover, research conducted by the Australian Workplace and Productivity Agency (AWPA, 2012) commented on the efficacy of VET:

Low-paid workers, especially low-paid women, are major clients for the VET sector and they are more likely to move to higher skilled employment after VET training, with 27.7 per cent of graduates from low paid occupations moving to jobs with a higher skill level after training compared to 3 per cent of those from other occupations (p. 79).

Given these results it appeared surprising to VET practitioners that their pivotal role in achieving these outcomes was not understood or valued by policy makers. At a time of increasing workplace demand for skilled workers, VET practitioners believed their role in developing workforce skills was critical.

**Conclusion**

This research applies a distinctive approach to some of the dilemmas experienced by VET practitioners in a dual sector organisation that is informed by Beck’s risk theory (see Beck, 1992, 1999, 2009a). When VET practitioners
are viewed through the lens of risk their position as addressees of risk, through the processes of individualisation, is evident (see Beck 2000a; Beck, & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). This position can be personally costly and disempowering as practitioners have disclosed, and have acted, in varying degrees, as a constraint on their capacity to challenge and engage with macro and meso level policy formation.

VET practitioners felt they lacked a voice in the policy environment that is created by others despite the potential impact these policy decisions have on them. Appreciation for the educational wisdom of VET practitioners appears to have diminished as the hegemony of training packages and compliance systems have developed and dominated the VET environment (see for example, Nakar, 2012; Jackson, 1995). Individual practitioners have become engaged in the task of managing risk through compliance systems and organisational processes to avoid blame at the individual level. Little time or support remains for practitioners to engage in meaningful ways with macro and meso level policy formation. They have effectively become the intersection of cascading macro and meso level risk, in the TAFE division, and the implicit community obligations that continue to inform ‘teaching in TAFE’.

Simultaneously, VET practitioners’ identity formation must contend with ambiguity on the one hand as the complexity and breadth of the role has increased. On the other hand, practitioners need to accommodate their abiding commitment to the long-standing community obligations of TAFE. These
tensions produce an environment primed for significant stress and wellbeing risks within the personal experience of VET practitioners.

Irrespective of these challenges, VET practitioners’ propensity to engage in reflexivity provided a mechanism for individual and collective negotiation with discourses and activities that produce risk in their daily experience. Reflexivity promotes VET practitioners’ capacity to negotiate a pathway between the tensions inherent in their role. Beyond this utility, reflexive practice facilitates understanding that challenges the performative proclivity of the organisation as it contends with macro level risk and commercialisation.

VET practitioners in this research reported that while teaching in TAFE delivers high personal reward through teaching and the acquittal of TAFE’s community obligations, this comes with personal and wellbeing risks, and creates other unintended organisational shortcomings. Of particular concern for practitioners were the organisational shortcomings that continued to extract a personal price on their wellbeing given that they remained largely unacknowledged. The capacity of an organisation to manage staff performance was felt to be fundamental to the wellbeing of the workforce and the success of the organisation by practitioners. However, they reported unacknowledged inadequacies in managing staff performance from their experiences within the organisation. VET practitioners experienced growing expectations through increased teaching contact time, compliance requirements, student complexity and inadequacies in managing staff performance. These unacknowledged health and wellbeing risks bring with them a potentially high personal price for ‘teaching in TAFE’.
CHAPTER EIGHT: The Cost of Quality

Introduction

This chapter continues the theme of micro level risk and the impact it has on VET practitioners in their everyday experience within a dual sector organisation. The context of a dual sector organisation creates a set of circumstances that has the potential to elevate VET practitioners’ stress and workload; these are juxtaposed against practices that allow VET practitioners to appropriate the organisation’s status, commitment to quality course delivery and student outcomes. Practitioner concerns with the changing nature of their relationships with students, the increasingly consumerist environment of tertiary education and the quality of their engagement with the learning process are factors addressed in this chapter.

This chapter examines a range of issues that VET practitioners experience when delivering quality training programs. The diverse and changing nature of the students and the risks inherent in these relationships with VET practitioners is examined. The impact of quality requirements are then addressed in the delivery of training packages and VET practitioners’ view of current VET teaching qualifications.

Meeting diverse student needs

Responses from practitioners relating to questions about change indicated that VET practitioners have observed shifts in some students’ behaviours over the last decade. These behaviours reflect a range of changes in societal attitudes and
the experiences and composition of student cohorts. One of the significant change factors for VET practitioners has been the growth in international students as the market for this cohort has grown exponentially and the organisation has developed a substantial commercial activity in relation to it (see DEECD, 2013).

In the year ending 2014, there were 149,785 international VET students and 137,469 English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) students. Many ELICOS students are found in the VET sector; however, providers comprise schools, universities and private organisations. The total number of student in all education sectors in Australia in 2014 was 589,860 (DET, 2015d).

In addition, VET practitioners identified that the nature of international students has its own challenges, with pressure on the student to succeed, transcending cultural and language differences. Coming to study in Australia was a significant commitment for some of these students as one practitioner said:

I understand the sacrifices that those students’ families make for them to come. Their families might have 10 different members of the family supporting that one person to come to Australia. They had to have a year’s rent in advance; they had to pay their fees up front for the year. (VET practitioner)

While the VET sector is not alone in meeting the needs of these students, in dual sector organisations it frequently provides entry pathways for students who are not able or ready to meet the entry criteria for their intended destinations in higher education (see, Mills, McLaughlin, & Carnegie, 2013; DEECD, 2013).
Practitioners have also continued to provide education and training to other student cohorts such as those with disabilities, migrants and refugee communities. They felt that few sectors in the education field had to manage the diversity of cohorts that the VET sector is required to manage. Students can range in age from their mid-teens to mature adults of advanced years. While many schools do manage a diverse student cohort up to adulthood (18 years), universities generally engage with adult students. The VET practitioner’s role can straddle a wide age cohort with divergent social, cultural and personal learning needs often simultaneously. It was not exceptional for VET practitioners to report having recent school leavers and postgraduate students in the one teaching situation.

These student differences are compounded by the variety of contexts and environments in which VET practitioners operate. Education researcher Leesa Wheelahan supported this view in an interview conducted by Pat Foreword, Federal TAFE Secretary AUE (Forward, 2014):

I’ve always thought (and this has got me in big trouble) that teaching in TAFE is far more complex than teaching in the other sectors, although teachers in the other sectors challenge that notion. The reason I think it’s more complex is because the diversity of contexts in which TAFE teaches is far wider than either the schools or the higher education sectors (p. 13).

VET practitioners may have student cohorts that include those without any contextual knowledge of the subject matter juxtaposed against those who want to formalise their existing skill and knowledge and complete a qualification. While RPL processes have been designed to accommodate students with existing competency, students frequently need to address gaps that mean extra workload for VET practitioners through customising individual learning plans. VET
practitioners must negotiate the resultant extensive breadth of student learning needs and capacities. This can be difficult, as one practitioner explained:

When you are dealing with people who don’t know, and then those who have all that knowledge and experience because they are formalising management experience into a qualification, for example, their needs are very, very different. (VET practitioner)

One practitioner commented on this diversity, saying:

My biggest learning curve was that there were so many different levels and so many different walks of life and so many influences that actually affect people’s learning. No two people are the same. (VET practitioner)

VET practitioners pointed to their particular role in supporting the workplace training of students with disabilities. A view quantified by Manufacturing Skills Australia (2014) in its submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment that identifies TAFE as the main provider of training for those with disabilities:

Learners with a disability are more likely to be enrolled at TAFE with 70% of learners in 2011 participating in training through a TAFE course. Within the student population undertaking training, the proportion of students with a disability choosing TAFE (70%) was higher than the proportion of all students choosing TAFE (66%) (p. 7).

The inexorable demand to work across diverse groups, often without adequate prerequisite skills, brings risks, personal cost and rewards. Tailoring learning experiences that will engage this diverse range of students can create extra workload and stress for VET practitioners as they attempt to bring diverse groups together.

Some student cohorts create additional stress as they may have experienced
trauma or have limited understanding of the educational environment in which they find themselves. One practitioner recounted such an experience with refugee students:

They were looking to me to not only to teach them but also to support them in their homesickness, the cultural awareness, all these other things that we weren’t given any training for; I found that very stressful. (VET practitioner)

Some students came from a very limited educational understanding:

One man that I got to fill in the enrolment form, I asked him where he went to school. He said I have never been to school. I said to him surely you went to a primary school to year five or six. He had never been to school formally in his life. He had never seen the ocean before in his life. He said he came on a boat built for 15 people that had 55 in it. The waves were so big, he said, that you just resign yourself to the fact that you are going to die.

Someone had given him a joint at the wharf and he smoked it 12 hours out. There was no food, no water, and no toilets. They were in the boat for 72 hours.

The practitioner went on to say:

They just love our country, they just love it. They had no family and I would always bring them a birthday cake. You can’t have a birthday without a birthday cake. A cake at Coles or somewhere only costs you six bucks but to them it was so important. (VET practitioner)

For VET practitioners committed to acquitting their sense of community obligations, these experiences were an integral part of their role. While they may be stressful and personally demanding, they were also fulfilling and enriching. Some practitioners engaged in their own remedies to support students, one practitioner commenced a Master’s Degree in Counselling, while another responded by, ‘doing a short counselling course to gain some understanding of
how people think and what to do for them when they are homesick’ (VET practitioner).

Evidence provided to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment, *TAFE: an Australian asset* (HRSCEE, 2014) by Ms Aliesje Kolovis is representative of the experiences of practitioners in this research:

I was going down a very bad path. If I had not been linked in with TAFE, I know for a fact that I would either have been in jail or dead, and definitely not sitting here today. Luckily, someone was able to push me in the right direction. I started my interactions with TAFE in a Gaining Access to Training and Education Course. I did the one, which was a Year 10 equivalency. That kept me off the streets and from doing bad things. It gave me the boosted maths, English and a few other subjects as well. After that, I worked for a while and then I discovered my passion was community service work. So I enrolled in a Certificate III, went on to Certificate IV, had a break to work for a while and came back and did my Diploma in 2012. I cannot express how valuable being able to afford to go to TAFE was (p. 101).

A VET practitioner voiced a wider concern that private RTOs were not taking up the more complex student cohorts such as ‘disadvantaged youth, young mums or those with a disability because private RTOs mostly have programs that make money quickly’ (VET practitioner). An article by AEU federal TAFE secretary Pat Forward (2014) quantified this concern regarding the unethical approach to the vocational sector that has resulted, for example, in the Victorian Government withholding $19.6 million in payments from BAWM (a subsidiary of ASX-listed Company ‘Vocation’) for failing to provide a proper standard of training:

The current regulation system is confused and piecemeal, and is allowing for-profit companies to milk the system and pocket millions of taxpayers’ dollars with little regulation. Regulations need to be changed so that only organisations whose primary purpose is to provide vocational education are eligible for funding subsidies, to
ensure that providers whose main purpose is making profits do not undermine the VET system. (p. 5)

Practitioners believed that the unique role and history of TAFE institutions made them ideally positioned to provide a VET pathway for disadvantaged student cohorts into workforce participation and engagement in the wider community. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report, *TAFE: an Australian asset* (HRSCEE, 2014) recognised the significant role TAFE continues to play in acquitting these community obligations in the VET sector:

The significant role played by TAFE as a provider of opportunities for those in positions of disadvantage and vulnerability was a clear theme in the evidence. While some private training organisations do provide support in this area, this important community support role can often fall to TAFE. Overall, the evidence showed that TAFE undertakes this role well—indeed, in some cases, TAFE has quite literally turned lives around. The Committee recognises the challenges that TAFE faces in meeting the needs of these students, and feels that federal VET funding should take into account this role (p. 8).

VET practitioners identified much of the ‘significant role’ the committee recognised as the direct result of their individual and collective day-to-day interactions with students.

**Managing risk in student relationships**

The overwhelming assessment of VET practitioners’ regarding their relationships with their student cohorts was positive. Nonetheless, practitioners reported that some changes in student relationships have been less positive. These changes have created uncertainty and stress for practitioners.
Some of these changes related to a student’s life stage as one practitioner reported:

Students have some serious issues. Too young to be here and their English is terrible. Some are not well funded enough. Others are just vagueing off like the average 18-19 year old does these days. We are expecting them to be adults; they are 18 going on 13. They don’t mature neurologically until somewhere around 22-25 years old. It’s in the second year they change from being a high school student to becoming an adult. They make all the mistakes in the first year. In the second year they realise they are getting to the end of the course. Mum is knocking on the door saying I have paid for this, what are you going to get me in return? (VET practitioner)

Another VET practitioner identified a recent change in some student attitudes as an increasingly ‘consumerist approach’ to VET education (VET practitioner). Yet another described some students’ approach to learning like ‘buying lollies in a lolly shop’ or ‘buying a new DVD’ (VET practitioner). For one practitioner there was a marked difference in her experience with local and international students:

What I identified is that our local students see education as a right and internationals students see education as a privilege. That is the difference between the two cohorts in their commitment. (VET practitioner)

There was considerable frankness from participants about the stress and personal cost from the pressure they experienced from some students who behaved as though they were ‘buying’ a qualification and had ‘little respect’ for the role of the VET practitioner (VET practitioner).

These student attitudes created tension for practitioners who felt that as the ‘addressees of risk’ they needed to juggle student demands for success,
organisational funding regimes that need successful completions and their commitment to their own professional integrity (see Beck, 2000b). Managing challenging students who were unwilling or insufficiently mature to ‘earn’ their qualification, through study and application to the task, was conversely one area where the rigours of assessment compliance became a support rather than a hindrance. A practitioner pointed to the practice of validation that provided a collective antidote to their individual risk exposure in these situations saying, ‘having the chance to validate an assessment confirms and supports your judgement when you are challenged’ (VET practitioner). The dispersal of risk through collaborative validation processes enabled individual practitioners to confirm their assessment (demonstration of the required skills and knowledge) practices with other practitioners making the target of any potential student challenge far more diffuse.

Consumerist approaches to education from some students confronted with increasing fees and stress garnered a measure of empathy and understanding from a practitioner who reflected on his own early educational pathway, saying:

I got a Bachelor of Education and I did a Diploma course after that, it was two years not three, a lot cheaper and more practical. I wouldn’t have done it if it had cost me $10,000 and you had to pay on the spot or take out a loan. It is all very one-dimensional thinking now. (VET practitioner)

The Municipal Association of Victoria (2012), in their submission to the TAFE Reform Panel, supported the concern of VET practitioners regarding increases in TAFE fees. The association indicated that increases would have a negative impact on education and subsequently on employment for youth and particularly
disadvantaged members of the community. VET practitioners could ‘not fathom’ this approach to developing a skilled workforce and looked for ways to support students in reaching their goals (VET practitioner).

Other risks existed in the student relationships VET practitioners managed. One of these was the ways in which some students viewed their training as a fundamentally commercial transaction. A protective response from some practitioners to ‘consumerist’ student pressure was a withdrawal, to some degree, from risky educational relationships. Typically this occurred through VET practitioners restricting students’ access to them. Practitioners limited their contact details and availability in response to increasing risk from some students. The use of email, set hours for student appointments and contact through administration staff were some of the ‘cocooning’ strategies VET practitioners used to protect themselves from risk (see for example, Popcorn, 1991). The process of ‘cocooning’ as a response to risk was a way for an individual to protect themselves from an environment perceived as unfriendly, dangerous, or otherwise unwelcome (Popcorn, 1991; Starr, 2012b). The development of sophisticated technology such as the internet and mobile phones has made this process far easier.

The term ‘cocooning’ was popularised in the 1990s by marketing consultant Faith Popcorn in *The Popcorn Report: The Future of Your Company, Your World, Your Life*. Popcorn (1991) suggested that cocooning comprised three forms: the socialised cocoon, in which one retreats to the privacy of one’s home; the armored cocoon, in which one establishes a barrier for protection from
external threats; and the wandering cocoon, where individuals travel with a
technological barrier for insulation against the environment. VET practitioners
reported reluctantly enlisting various forms of cocooning in response to the risk
they were exposed to from some students. The most common form of cocooning
was represented by the practitioner who said, ‘I don’t give out my details like I
used to. I don’t give out mobile phone numbers and get students to email my
work email. I keep my contact details private’ (VET practitioner). More formal
management of students within the compliance structures also appeared to be
another way practitioners protected themselves from risk.

For practitioners the dilemma of these risk management strategies became the
resultant symbiotic cycle of escalating risk they produced in which
performativity thrives. VET practitioners were concerned by increasing
performativity that brings with it the potential to change the social nature of their
learning relationship with students. Performativity creates an environment within
which ‘knowledge and knowledge relations, including the relationships between
learners, are de-socialized’ (Ball, 2003a, p. 226). Ironically, the use of
cocooning as a risk management strategy has the potential to escalate this
symbiotic risk and work in opposition to practitioners’ sense of TAFE’s
community obligation, which is inherently ‘socialising’ of the education
experience.

In some instances the relationship with a student had the potential to create
considerable stress and personal cost for practitioners:

Teachers feel bullied. I used to give students my mobile number and
students would very rarely ring. Now they are texting teachers on
weekends and we now have a teacher who is bullied so much, endless
texting on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. There is no respect
for other people's time it’s just a different culture. (VET practitioner)

Relationships with students are complex and are inevitably impacted by the
global risk forces that permeate the organisation. Students themselves experience
high expectations and demands and respond to the increasing commercialisation
of the organisation from their own anxiety and uncertainty for their futures in the
risk environment that is the global workforce (see Beck, 2000b).

Nonetheless, in the 2004 Spring Edition of The Australian TAFE Teacher, Davis
warned that ‘bullying by/between colleagues and managers and the growing
incidence of bullying from and between students leaves TAFE teachers feeling
less than safe in the workplace (p.15). VET practitioners identified the particular
dual sector organisational environment as a contributor to feeling unsafe in the
workplace. VET practitioners believed that the magnitude of bullying and its
personal costs are only just beginning to be addressed in this sector of education.

A number of recent restructur es and the attendant reductions in fulltime staff in
preference to sessional staff created a sense of vulnerability for VET practitioners
in the organisation. A submission to the House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Education and Employment Inquiry into Workplace Bullying, The
Australian Education Union (AEU, 2012) quantifies these reductions:

The WorkSafe ACT investigation [into TAFE] noted that funding
reductions (of around 40% in real terms since 1997), and the resulting
casualisation of the teacher workforce had contributed to increased
workload and stress in the workplace and was associated with an
increased health and safety risk of bullying (p. 4).
One VET practitioner questioned the position of vulnerability VET practitioners found themselves in, asking:

Where is the protection for teachers? The organisation pushes the needs of the students. The students and the organisation are protected. Who protects the teacher from all the demands? Is it OK for teachers to work a 60-hour week? (VET practitioner)

This significant issue was identified for VET practitioners and teachers across all education sectors. In Victoria, which has the most ‘devolved’ system, the Australian Education submission reported that from 2011-2012 it had handled some 500 direct bullying-related inquiries. The additional risk of concern for VET practitioners was that exponential casualisation of the workforce meant, as one VET practitioner explained, ‘no one is going to complain about bullying when they have a sessional contract. Who would be that stupid?’ This VET practitioner’s concern was also supported in The Australian Education Union submission, (AUE, 2012):

With increasing casualisation of occupations such as teaching, it can be predicted that the incidence, as distinct from the reporting, of bullying behaviours will rise. This latter distinction is important as workers in insecure forms of employment have both a greater incapacity to access and a greater reluctance to utilise formal complaints procedures (p. 4).

VET practitioners contended with significant pressures while managing diverse and challenging student cohorts and attempting to inspire those same students to fulfil their educational and community potential. One practitioner summed up the challenge saying; ‘I think it is a shame we are missing what skills training is all about, which should be a continuous build-up of skills and a lifelong learning journey’ (VET practitioner).
Delivering quality programs

A strong discourse highlighting the quality of learning programs and student outcomes delivered by this dual sector organisation was threaded through the interviews with VET practitioners. Possessing the status and prestige of a university in conjunction with the rigour of research and teaching in the organisation was viewed as a significant element of that quality discourse for VET practitioners (see for example, Matthews & Murphy, 2010; Etzioni, 1961). Practitioners did more than simply ‘feel good’ about the status of working in a dual sector environment: they believed it offered real advantages to them and their students through quality course delivery.

This discourse provided an alternative view that operated to confront notions of VET practice that were devaluing. Despite the litany of problems practitioners expressed in relation to systems, compliance processes and their lower order in the priorities of the organisation, VET practitioners appropriated the status of the university (see for example, Wheelahan, Leahy, Fredman, Moodie, Arkoudis, & Bexley, 2012; DEED, 2013). Such an appropriation acted to neutralise some of the low status perceptions associated with TAFE course delivery and support claims of quality. A VET practitioner summed this perception up saying, ‘from the student perspective they know that if they get something [qualification] from this organisation they are getting something of value’ (VET practitioner).

Underpinning educational approaches that focused on students therefore supported quality outcomes. Williams & Goldberg (2005, p. 75) claims that ‘education is no longer about teachers and teaching’ and ‘societal forces now
demand that the focus be on learners and learning’. VET practitioners using ‘androgogical’ or ‘adult learning’ concepts have traditionally focused on student-centred learning and would concur with these principles. The difficulty for VET practitioners was that this approach also applied to systems and processes that support student learning, which did not always coalesce with the meso level imperatives and financial constraints of the organisation. One VET practitioner acknowledged a focus on the students’ best interests by pushing the boundaries of organisational processes:

What I tend to sort of be mindful of is that when you advise students about the type of units to take and the cost I tend to do the best for the student not the Uni/TAFE. I tend to help them as individuals and you can structure things differently to help them. (VET practitioner)

Organisational processes and systems opened practitioners up to other risks in relation to quality program delivery. Technologically ‘savvy’ practitioners and those who taught in technology course areas complained that existing systems were inadequate and a risk to the delivery of quality student learning and outcomes. One practitioner commented:

As soon as students go into Blackboard [Learning Management System] and have a look around the shutters go up. It doesn’t matter how many links you put up they will go off to YouTube to find it themselves. They keep saying how can I email you and I say go to Blackboard and do they go Blackboard? And I say yes we have been in Blackboard every single class for the last 10 weeks. “Oh, how do you check that”, they ask? (VET practitioner)

Another said:

They are tech savvy 18 year olds. They all have the technical literacy. I used to teach Media Studies and English. If you showed them the ads they could sequence the ads and they could understand the different shots. Show them something that is black and white and
they are not that sure. It is not part of their world. This looks old. It’s daggy. (VET practitioner)

Quality course delivery necessitated an understanding of the challenges of teaching different generations of learners and embracing, accepting and respecting the needs of different generations, even though it created challenges for VET practitioners.

Delivering the quality standards that practitioners felt were acceptable could only be achieved; they felt, with an intensive investment of time. In turn, the investment of significant time exerted a considerable impost on their personal time. VET practitioners responded by examining their practice and weighing up their commitment to TAFE’s community obligations against the individualisation of risk and the personal cost that accompanied it (see Beck, 1992, 2000b, 2009a).

Training Packages compounding the cost

The capacity to deliver quality programs was put at risk according to some practitioners due to the complexity and contested interpretation of training packages that made them difficult to navigate (see for example, Grace, 2005; Wheelahan, & Moodie, 2011; Hodge, 2013, 2014). Training packages are regularly reviewed to assess their content and appropriateness to ensure competence in their field, with the previous body the NSSC guidelines specifying a review of each training package every three years. On 3 April 2014 the COAG Industry and Skills Council agreed that the NSSC would be dissolved to be replaced by the ISCAC. Yet another review of training packages was then initiated by Minister for Industry MacFarlane (DET, 2014a).
Reviewing of the skills and knowledge required is undertaken as part of the regular training package cycle to ensure they reflect the changing needs of the industry for which they are designed (ASQA, 2015b). Training packages outline the benchmark for skills and knowledge required by the relevant industry. They also stipulate the ways in which qualifications can be constructed using units of competence within the specific training package. However, according to Hodge (2014), scant extant reviews have been conducted on the ways in which VET practitioners interpret the descriptions of evidence that indicate competence for the skills and knowledge required.

This observation is particularly significant as training packages contain individual units of competency that comprise elements and performance criteria, skills and knowledge benchmarks, critical aspects of evidence for assessment and range statements that allow for their application in different work environments (see for example, DET, 2015a). Each aspect of the units of competency that comprise a VET qualification need to be read together, and understood as a whole. Some qualifications may have in excess of 10 units of competence (see Appendix A). A high level of technical skill on the part of the VET practitioner is required to ensure that all the skills and knowledge required can be demonstrated at an adequate benchmarked level by the student. Hodge’s (2014) point here exposes the epicenter of complexity that interpreting the ‘intent’ of the training package text has become for VET practitioners, which adds to the time pressures they experience and creates an additional stress to ‘get the interpretation right’.
VET practitioners reported an ongoing concern about the adequacy of the Certificate IV Training and Assessment to provide VET practitioners with sufficient confidence and skill to negotiate training package requirements. Research into this issue was welcomed by practitioners, with one stating, ‘VET practitioners in the organisation have strong views about how they train people to be trainers. We deserve what we get if we haven’t trained them properly’ (VET practitioner). The strongly held views of these practitioners reflect contemporary concern about the need to review the appropriateness of current VET practitioner training (see for example, Mitchell, Chappell, Bateman, & Roy, 2006; Smith & Harris, 2001; Clayton, Meyers, Bateman, & Bluer, 2010; Karmel, 2011). As pointed out previously by Hodge (2014) the preliminary step of understanding the nature of interpretation has to a large extent been missing from this debate.

Notwithstanding these debates surrounding training packages and competency based training generally, the focus of VET practitioners was targeted at a much more practical level. Practitioners’ focus on training resources and delivery strategies is a consequence of the construction of training packages that do not suggest how a learner should be trained, rather, they specify the ‘skills and knowledge required to perform effectively in the workplace’ (ASQA, 2015b). In other words, VET practitioners find no guidance in training packages relating to the development of training resources or strategies to delivery training, the focus is on the performance outcomes of the student (see for example, Smith, 2002; ASQA, 2013; Hodge, 2013).
Developing quality course materials to deliver the complexity of training package competencies was the point at which the macro and meso level debates coalesced into pragmatic decisions that needed to be made by these VET practitioners. They were responsible for determining the learning strategies and developing the training resources that would be required to a standard they felt appropriate for their teaching needs. At this point, for many practitioners, a high personal cost through unpaid overtime was incurred.

Practitioners spoke at length about the stress and workload of compliance that overtook their teaching preparation. They understood compliance requirements as an impost on their capacity to spend the hours they needed in preparation, developing resources and training strategies. Clearly, for these practitioners the focus on resource development and quality training delivery was a central feature of their practice to which administrative and compliance elements should be subordinated. However, the nature of CBT and the need for resource development conspired to increase the risk and personal cost, in additional stress and workload, for VET practitioners in this research.

Smith (2002) points to a pronouncement an ANTA official made following the earlier introduction of training packages; that curriculum no longer existed, as part of the initial difficulty for practitioners. In reality, as Smith points out, a training package is a form of curriculum or syllabus. While NSW continued to develop a centralised curriculum or syllabus of content to support VET practitioners that included training resources and strategies, not all states followed this practice. In most cases, as for these VET practitioners, they were expected to
develop their own training resources and strategies from scratch using the skills and knowledge outcomes within units of competence as guidelines.

On the one hand, there are advantages and opportunities. The lack of formalised teaching resources and strategies creates a space for VET practitioners to innovate and develop their own approaches (see Waterhouse, 2001). One practitioner with a strong industry background thrived under these arrangements:

Being challenged to be innovative was really interesting and I loved doing things [resource development] that were different, so that was great. (VET practitioner)

The continuing and alternate view is that the reliance upon the individual VET practitioner’s expertise in developing training materials can also be ‘a possible route to disaster, with smaller and/or less scrupulous providers perhaps leaving it to under-qualified teachers to struggle as best they can’ (Smith, 2002, p. 77). A Senate Inquiry into the quality of VET also reported receiving submissions outlining the experience of many teachers who 'need more assistance than is currently available ... to carry out these tasks effectively, particularly in relation to identifying and/or developing learning strategies and teaching programs' (Senate EWRSBE Committee, 2000, p.150). Researchers continue to find that VET practitioners feel underprepared and ill equipped by current training programs (see for example, Karmel, 2011; Clayton, Meyers, Bateman, & Bluer, 2010; Dempsey, 2013). A VET practitioner in this research identified a practical problem with the growing plethora of commercially produced resources to assist in delivering training package requirements saying, ‘some are fine but many of these resources are of very dubious quality’ (VET practitioner).
Counterintuitively, this abundance of materials became a problem for VET practitioners in search of teaching resources as there was simply too much on offer and a lack of consistent quality or suitability. Practitioners also reported that good quality resources could be expensive and therefore out of reach.

Practitioners were quick to point out that the organisation had sponsored the development of course training materials for some training package qualifications. This was particularly the case when a course was delivered to a company as a commercial fee for service activity. Employers wanting to develop staff capability regularly contracted the organisation to request the delivery of courses that would enable their employees to gain a qualification and consequently develop their skills and knowledge. Typically the resources used to deliver these courses were developed in conjunction with the employer and customised to use the language, templates and business practices appropriate to that employer (see for example, Skills Victoria, 2010; AQTF, 2015b). The training usually occurred at the employer’s location and could involve significant cost to the employer. VET practitioners working with business and industry, developing training resources and strategies for these programs, reported that it was not only a rewarding professional experience, but it assisted them in developing appropriate and high quality training resources:

It’s great to work in industry with people from a prominent aviation company or multinational oil company. Their executives would be telling you what was going on in their workplace and the industry. It was a development session for the trainer and the program delivery as well. (VET practitioner)
Nonetheless, the constant changing of training packages and the practice of CBT based course delivery increased the workload and hence the personal cost for VET practitioners committed to delivering TAFEs community obligations through quality education. Risk abounded within the organisation for VET practitioners applying themselves to the development of quality course content. Consequently, VET practitioners positioned at the micro level of cascading risk impact were exposed to those who have ‘the power to divert the hazardousness of the risks they incur onto others’ (Beck, 2009b, p. 9). In simple terms, VET practitioners felt it was easy to blame them for shortcomings in the VET system that have much more complex causal factors.

One of the causal factors identified by VET practitioners was that training packages could be particularly problematic when students are not yet employed in the industry or sector in which they are studying. This is particularly significant, as the majority of TAFE students have not historically been employed in the field in which they are studying (see Hager, 1995). As training packages require a ‘skill and knowledge demonstration’ this can be difficult for those without an industry-based environment in which to demonstrate the required skills and knowledge. This is a ‘longstanding problem’ as the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (2000, p.19) identified, which in many ways reflects the underpinnings of training packages that have their very early origins in behaviourism and systems theory in 1950s to 1970s America (Hodge, 2007; Guthrie, 2008).
The usual VET response to these difficulties has been labelled as ‘fudging’ (Bourman, 2011). Practitioners must find ways to ‘fudge’ through strategies such as role-plays, community projects and practice scenarios. While these strategies have been in use in the VET sector for many years, they are a proxy for demonstrating skills in the workplace. Quality work placement remains a significant component in developing and assessing the level of student’s skills and knowledge (see Mitchell, Chappell, Bateman, & Roy, 2006). The dilemma was more adequately remedied for VET practitioners who trained in programs with placement components. ‘Placement experience is certainly more real for students’ said a VET practitioner, ‘because students get to really experience the skills’. However, this created another level of risk and stress as they managed the interaction with a third party employer throughout the process.

Clearly, meso level structures have impacts on how VET practitioners’ time can be allocated and the ways in which training resource development is viewed and prioritised within their course fields contributes to the allocation of time provided for this activity. While VET practitioners were vocal in relation to the personal time costs in unpaid work required to produce quality training content and strategies, they became positively strident when the issue of the quality of the current VET teaching qualifications arose.

**VET teaching qualifications**

At present the entry level qualification for VET practice is the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment TAE40110. VET practitioners are unique in many ways as VET practice is not a foundational career in the way engineering or social work
might be. Practitioners must have an area of existing expertise and qualifications on which to build their practice. Therefore, the transition to the VET environment from one in which they have years of experience can be significant. One practitioner confirmed the challenge:

The biggest thing I found when I came from industry into vocational training was that it was a whole different world, in regards to people’s perceptions and understandings. (VET practitioner)

Other practitioners questioned the preparation for VET practice:

Interesting to think, to ponder how we are preparing people to actually work in the VET system and you know that comes from the training that we are actually providing them—VET practice qualifications or a teaching qualification? How are we actually preparing people to work in the area and then to encompass what it is to be in the VET environment and how we navigate that? How do we deliver quality to students? Do we address that in any of the things around the Diploma or Certificate IV in Training and Assessment or in other VET practice qualifications? (VET practitioner)

The current minimum qualification (TAE40110) is a modification of the previous Certificate IV Training and Assessment TAA40104, which in turn was an upgrade of the foundational qualification the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training BSZ40198. Each iteration has brought a change in emphasis, although as Dempsey (2013) concluded, they are not radical departures from each other.

The qualifications have their origins in units of competency developed in the 1990s for workplace training and assessment (Smith, E., 2005). The original schema divided trainers into two categories: Category 1 for trainers provided training and assessment functions as part of their work on an occasional basis;
Category 2 for trainers with main function training and assessment roles. Category 2 trainers were deemed to require greater scrutiny and capability; hence they needed to obtain a Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment from 1998.

The adequacy and quality of this qualification and the preparation for VET practice has been under considerable scrutiny not only from VET practitioners in this research but an array of interested stakeholders. Karmel (2011), for example, confirms the currently unprecedented focus on the preparation of VET practitioners and the quality of current qualifications. A number of other studies have been undertaken by a range of stakeholders including Skills Australia (2010), the National Quality Council (Mitchell & Ward, 2010), the Australian Education Union (Forward 2010) and The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Clayton, Meyers, Bateman, & Bluer, 2010; Davids, 2008; Guthrie, 2010a, 2010b; Hodge, 2014). VET practitioners acknowledged and welcomed the current focus of debate on their qualifications. However, it was the nature of VET teaching that they believed was generally poorly understood:

It would be good if there were some way that when teachers get their quals…those teachers could be acknowledged. A lot of people say, “I am just a trainer or assessor.” People in the main part of the world don't even know what a Vocational Educator is! They might see someone in the workforce running OHS and think ‘I can do that’, but not realise what they have to do to get there, what pressure is on them to maintain currency. Lot of issues there. (VET practitioner)

Some of the individualisation of risk practitioners identified was creating their own professional identity or biography in which VET teaching qualifications played a significant role. When understood as an area of significant risk exposure,
VET practitioners’ disquiet about the qualifications assumed greater significance given questions about its quality and adequacy. One practitioner wanted to return to previous qualification practices:

We did three days of teaching and two days of study for 2 years. It was fantastic—really good, but now we get all these sessionals in with fabulous industry skills but no idea how to teach. We should be going back to one of these quals. It’s a risk. There are all these qualified teachers who have left TAFE.

It’s all very well putting Jo Blo, who has worked as a mechanic for years, a forty-year-old man in to show a 17 year old who would rather sit there on the electronic equipment. There is no system in TAFE to train anyone to be a teacher. The Dip VET!—Really! We should be going back to what we did years ago. (VET practitioner)

This concern of VET practitioners in this research was supported by Dempsey’s (2013, p. 94) research into the impact of the changing nature of VET practice, where just under ‘one third of participants (31.45%) indicated that the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment prepared them well for their VET teaching role’. For VET practitioners in this research the lack of satisfaction with the capacity of the existing qualification went further and became a source of risk.

One VET practitioner who also had existing teaching qualifications and experience suggested that those without such a background are put at risk and might struggle:

I have come from an education background and I had graduate teaching qualifications before coming in. I know it is not the standard required to come into TAFE. All I am saying is that in VET teacher preparation what we are saying to teachers about the environment; the struggle to know those things [professional teaching practice] with the current qualification. (VET practitioner)
Practitioners pointed to the short delivery of the VET qualifications as a potential cause for some of the risk disquiet they felt about the adequacy of current arrangements:

What is a risk in this sector? It is any provider who runs Cert. IV TAE on a very short basis. They devalue the quality across the sector. VET practitioners from some other providers have gaps in their knowledge, they don't know how to assess or run training. It’s a huge risk to us all in the sector. (VET practitioner)

Another practitioner said:

I have a very set identity about myself as an educator but I question how other people can complete their TAE in 6-7 days. I wonder how they can form an identity as a professional educator. I have seen how some RTOs deliver and what they do. They read out pages of the book. I mean, give me the book and let me go home for God's sake! They think that teaching is standing there and talking to the slide. That diminishes the quality.

In our organisation we have strong opinions about how we train VET practitioners and deliver the TAE. We deserve what we get in the organisation and the sector if we haven't trained practitioners properly. (VET practitioner)

Another practitioner said:

You can train anyone by writing a standard operating procedure but do they understand why they are doing it? (VET practitioner)

One VET practitioner addressed the risk of inadequate training programs that left VET practitioners underprepared, suggesting that the Diploma of VET Practice with its supervised practicums was a much more ‘effective and helpful approach’ for those coming into the sector. While the qualification provides a more in-depth learning experience it also distributes risk, perhaps adding to its appeal, in the preparation of VET practitioners through shared experiences. These take place as
part of the practicum requirement and the development of communities of practice.

A study conducted by Hodge (2014) found that the difficulties VET practitioners identified with interpreting competencies might arise from both the limitations of their initial experiences and the lack of training education focused on interpreting training packages. Interpreting competency standards appeared to be a complex process for VET practitioners, who ‘reported that they took longer periods, around a year, to feel confident in interpreting competencies’ (Hodge, 2014, p. 8). Professional development targeting interpretation was viewed as a valuable development experience. Hodge’s findings support the view of VET practitioners in this research who also found that in terms of informal learning regular assessment validation sessions were a powerful way to learn about competencies.

Ongoing professional development in teaching and learning was also an issue expressed by one practitioner who felt it was not promoted by the organisation as rigorously as required:

The role of VET practitioner has significant pressures on it at the moment to just get out and do stuff and just ignore PD [professional development]. A lot of staff have minimal qualifications as educators, they don't see the need to do anything beyond that. Other people do but it's not supported, people need help to do it. People think the Cert. IV TAE will do, it will get me in, rather than a way to start to develop practice into the future. (VET practitioner)

Another practitioner described the pressures of mixed messages:

Then of course there is all the mapping stuff for compliance so you can teach. Currency and competency. Updating your quals that sort of thing or downgrading them! I did the Diploma of VET Practice
instead of updating my superseded BSZ40198. They said to me you still have to do the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Then I get a notification two weeks ago and now there is a new core unit Language Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) and you have got to go and do that too. Hello…Hello. It really is a lifelong learning process, particularly for the educator. (VET practitioner)

Practitioners felt they needed to manage these risks to their professional teaching competency and currency by themselves. As addressees of risk in an unstable sector they believed it was risky to wait for others within the organisation to provide support:

In your role as vocational educator no one looks after you. You need to look after yourself. You might be out of a job any minute. A decade ago people in the organisation looked after you. Now people are contacting our department saying they need to update their VET teaching qualification and time is running out. There is a lack of performance management and planning. A lot of managers are previous teachers and just don’t know about performance management and planning. (VET practitioner)

Individual VET practitioners appeared to be the point of convergence for global and meso level risk pressures that impacted on their professional practice. The struggle to manage these competing and complex requirements in an unstable sector was compounded by their underlying commitment to teach within the growing demands of a knowledge society (see Hargreaves, 2011). VET practitioners identified a commitment to TAFEs community obligations rather than the imperative to make a profit as their primary focus.

Evidence provided to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment (HRSCEE, 2014) by Ms Joann Pyne, Director, Barrier Reef Mount Isa and Tropical North Institute of TAFE, reflects the sentiments of VET practitioners:
We need to really do a good job in this country of explaining what the role of the vocational education system is for. People very clearly understand what a university does. They understand what a school does but are very confused about what a TAFE does. So we need to start a national conversation about the value of TAFE. (p. 4)

**Conclusion**

Repeatedly, the issues canvassed above with VET practitioners revealed the dilemma that constitutes their daily risk experience (see Beck, 1992, 2009a). Significant ambiguity existed for practitioners within their teaching role with its requirement for teaching delivery across a wide student cohort. Opinions clearly varied on the efficacy and quality of VET teaching qualifications that were seen to be useful when given adequate delivery time and ongoing support but not rigorous enough by others who felt the current arrangements were a ‘huge risk’ to the sector (VET practitioner).

The forces of global risk that drive marketisation and commercial competition flow through the organisation leaving practitioners questioning their preparation for the challenge that is inherent in the VET sector in Australia. The result of this uncertainty coupled with high demand in the VET practitioner role created personal cost as risk impacted the everyday lives of practitioners. Furthermore, commitment to the community obligations of TAFE underpinned their questioning of the increasing workload; stress and personal cost that did not appear to have a corollary benefit for students.

Compounding the risk to practitioners was the dual sector environment that created a contrariety of responses relating to VET practitioners’ perception of
status and quality. On the one hand, practitioners identified some of the ways in which a dual sector environment contributed to their sense of being less valued. On the other hand, they appropriated the status of the university to support claims that VET qualifications issued from the organisation carried substantial quality and status. Nonetheless, practitioners reported a sense of not being understood by the organisation with its higher education priorities.

A significant paradox existed for VET practitioners who felt the compliance regimes and practices of the organisation and the sector coalesced to ‘dumb down’ VET. VET was not simply a ‘lower’ or ‘easier’ educational option than higher education. In fact, for many post graduate and mature students it offered an invaluable opportunity to develop skills and knowledge that complemented their foundational higher education qualifications or industry experience. For young people, young mothers and disadvantaged students it offered a practical skills based option to enable them to join the workforce and participate fully in the community (see Municipal Association of Victoria, 2012).

These were not concerns VET practitioners felt were paramount in their experience of commercial RTOs, which were primarily focused on their business models and increased profit. The problems with quality, financial accountability and student outcomes are well documented and frequently the subject of media attention. Attempts to address these problems are yet to be completely successful and may prove difficult to manage given the underlying profit motive.
For VET practitioners the impact of meso level risk is increasingly felt in their everyday experience. They were concerned that the commercialisation of tertiary education and the TAFE sector in particular has led to a change in the relationship they have with students, increasing their exposure to risk and potentially devaluing the learning experience for students. Practitioners experienced increasing personal cost through contending with a stressful environment and a growing need for unpaid work to meet the quality demands for training strategies and resource development. Collective strategies where risk could be shared and potentially decreased for the individual, such as validation and moderation practices, were not able to neutralise the substantial exposure to risk they experienced.

As addressees of risk in a complex and nationally important sector of the Australian community, VET practitioners’ experiences led them to amplify the call for a mature and enlightened ‘national conversation’ about the purpose and ‘value of TAFE’ (HRSCEE, 2014, p.51).
CHAPTER NINE: Risk in VET practitioner experience

Introduction
This chapter draws together the main threads of this research from the discussions in previous chapters. It notes the community obligations at the heart of VET practice and the central role TAFE has to play in workforce development in a competitive global marketplace. The lens of ‘risk’ through which this research has been developed has provided a unique view of VET practice and the macro, meso and micro forces that impact practitioners. These result in both positive and negative outcomes for practitioners. The conclusions in this chapter highlight VET practitioner concerns as they have been exposed through the lens of risk. The chapter examines the impact of the unique dual sector environment and the resultant risk that is evident in compliance and audits systems, as well as reflexive responses from practitioners. The chapter concludes with the recognition that positive change is possible and recommends areas for further research and action.

The unique risk of a dual sector organisation
The central aim of this research has been to examine the underlying causes of the unexpected phenomena originally observed within a dual sector TAFE/higher education organisation of the interplay between compliance systems and risk. The verbalised discontent of VET practitioners regarding their sense of risk, in balancing their compliance driven tasks and their teaching workloads, triggered a number of research questions. These were, ‘What is risk?’ ‘How is risk reflected in VET compliance systems?’ ‘Do these compliance systems and practices impact on VET practitioners’ everyday experience and the way they construct their
professional identity? ‘In what ways are VET practitioners empowered to either resist or accept compliance practices?’

In responding to these questions a grounded theory informed research design was chosen, noting Strauss’ (1987, p. 7) assertion that, ‘… grounded theory methodology emphasises the need for developing many concepts and their linkages in order to capture a great deal of the variation that characterises the central phenomena studied during any particular research project’. Developing this thesis has certainly produced many concepts and their associated linkages with VET practitioner experience. On occasion these have proved to be disturbing, other times surprising and more often inspiring. The original impetus for this research came from VET practitioners’ frustration with the tension arising from what they saw as unnecessary compliance work taking away time from their core commitment to teaching. The sentiments practitioners’ expressed relating to these competing demands opened up multifarious areas for examination. The consequent investigation into the personal experiences that VET practitioners have been prepared to share have been very much a privilege. In response this research has sought to represent each practitioner’s experience in a respectful manner while capturing Strauss’ (1987) ‘variation within the central phenomena’.

In this thesis the impact of risk on VET practitioner experience has been scrutinised through a particular categorisation of macro/global, meso/organisational and micro/individual levels (Swanborn, 2010). While there are a range of different constructions of these levels of analysis that are used across and within disciplines (Bing, Akintoye, Edwards, & Hardcastle, 2005;
Bergstrom, & Dekker, 2014; Turner & Boyns, 2006), the categories used in this research have provided utility for conceptualising the flow of risk from VET practitioner perspectives to make an original contribution to this area of research. They do not claim to be definitive. Nonetheless, they offer a way to categorise the findings while acknowledging that slippage occurs within and between these categories.

As a result of utilising the above categories, this thesis posits that the cascading impact of globalised risk compounds the exposure of VET practitioners to risk through the process of individualisation, thus making them ‘addressees’ of increasing risk (see Beck, 2000b; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). As addressees of risk VET practitioners are constantly negotiating their practice and identity within their everyday experience within a dual sector organisation. It is in this process of negotiation through reflexive practice that significant stress occurs on the one hand, and on the other hand, opportunities to use risk as a catalyst for change also emerged.

The unique approach used by this research brings together concepts of risk theory and symbolic interactionism to examine issues that impact VET practitioners’ professional identity and everyday experience. The processes of identity can be examined through these theories within the social context in which semiotic meaning is produced and is increasingly permeated by risk. This recognises the ways in which risk permeates interactions and creates a particular context in which they occur (see for example, Beck, 1992, 2000b, 2009a; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).
Additionally unique to this thesis, is a new glimpse of the interplay between VET practitioner experience in a dual sector organisation and the unique nature of risk within that environment. Risk clearly existed prior to the examination of this research project and formed a background to the interviews with practitioners. Taking this as a starting point, practitioners’ responses and insights into the impact of risk were made visible through the data collection, analysis and theory building throughout the research. This process formed the scaffold for developing a chronicle of VET practitioner experience within a risk sensitive and unstable VET sector (see Harris, Simons & Clayton, 2005). A clear and unique theme emerged from the data that identified the particular dual sector environment in which this research was conducted, as a point of significance for VET practitioners.

For many decades the VET sector and TAFE in particular has been confronted by an environment characterised by being in a state of chronic change. Practitioners’ experiences in this research were juxtaposed against the demands of this unstable sector and constantly shifting priorities at the direction of successive governments and industry groups (see also Marginson, 1997; Harvey, 2007; Brown, 2011; Smith & Keating, 2003). The point of difference theorised in this research has been the context of a dual sector environment that creates a significantly unique risk profile for VET practitioners.

Nonetheless, practitioner standpoints emerged that defined a strong commitment to their dual sector TAFE’s unique community obligations and social justice objectives. They exposed the complexity of operationalising these commitments
in an environment constantly under funding threat, in competition with some less than scrupulous private RTOs and subject to the priorities of a higher education focused dual sector organisation. The personal cost for practitioners within the complexity of a dual sector TAFE was manifested in increased stress, high workloads, short-term employment contracts, strict compliance regimes, demanding student cohorts and requirements for increasing industry currency. Along with these difficulties practitioners were not convinced that their entry level qualifications prepared them adequately for their role, nor that their role or experience was valued.

Concepts of risk have enabled particular theoretical approaches to be taken to the conduct of this research. These have provided a unique opportunity to examine the nature of TAFE within this dual sector organisation. Karmel (2009) points out that dual sector institutions are complex with different approaches to education. However, in theorising the experience of these VET practitioners, a view emerged that something more than different education approaches was responsible for their sense of risk. This unifying thread developed as practitioners exposed the outworking of risk, which cascaded through the organisation from the global education environment. They traced the impact of risk from the macro level to its impact in the organisation that has become increasingly reactive at meso levels. Risk was then individualised and found expression in VET practitioner experience that was increasingly focused on compliance systems. Unresolved tension within VET practitioners’ experiences could then be understood within the context of increasing global competition within the education sector (see also Marginson, 2012; Harvey, 2007).
National governmental de-regulatory policies to improve Australia’s international economic competitiveness and productivity have created organisational risks for TAFEs in dual sector organisations as they encounter a proliferation of new, for-profit, low-cost private training providers. As a consequence, macro risk in an economically rationalist education model could be seen to increase risk for VET practitioners through the impost of inevitable and expanding compliance workloads and practices (see also Harris, Simons & Clayton, 2005; Bretherton, 2011).

These dilemmas created tensions for VET practitioners in their repeated assertions that compliance work competed with their teaching practice. Placing this tension in the broader context of TAFE’s purpose within the dual sector organisation made visible practitioners’ underlying commitment to the unique opportunities that TAFE’s implicit community obligations gave them. Practitioners simply saw their first and foremost allegiance to the community obligations that have been implicit in TAFE from its inception (Kangan, 1974; DEECD, 2013). Respondents believed the skills based teaching of the TAFE environment could provide a unique catalyst for workforce skill and personal development in students’ lives.

This view is in line with evidence from Buddlemyer, Leuing and Scutella’s (2012) research that found completing a Certificate III was a significant catalyst for many students in overcoming disadvantage. VET practitioners expressed a genuine belief that their role as educators could be part of a positive trajectory for their students; they simply believed that they could ‘make a difference’. Within
this dual sector organisation VET practitioners experienced the domination and hegemony of the higher education function over that of the TAFE. A dilemma existed for VET practitioners who interpreted this dominance as an indication that their work was both less important and less valued. This resulted in a belief that they too were less valued, which negatively impacted their sense of professional identity. Practitioners resented a discourse that they believed claimed pre-eminence for higher education and drowned out the discourse of community good from TAFE, within the organisation.

VET practitioners expressed a deep sense of frustration at the lack of transparency, visibility and policy contradiction of their obligations. Victoria’s TAFE Reform Panel (DEECD, 2013) noted the contradiction of implicit community obligations that are juxtaposed against an increasingly competitive marketplace and the operation of for-profit private RTOs. The Reform Panel (2013) identified the value of TAFE’s place in the community and its capacity to develop individuals and assist in overcoming disadvantage and urged governments to make these explicit. Not making these advantages explicit became a symbiotic risk when theorised through an understanding of Beck’s (2009a) observations, creating a ‘crisis of obligation’ for these VET practitioners.

VET practitioners voiced strong social justice positions and convictions relating to the capacity of TAFE to support disadvantaged cohorts of students in holistic ways that for-profit RTOs could not. These responses pointed to the overarching questioning of the purpose of education generally, and TAFE specifically, as either an intrinsically valuable community service or a commercial opportunity.
(HRSCEE, 2014). The dichotomy inherent in this view remains open to challenge as neither TAFE nor private RTOs operate solely from either of these purposes. VET practitioner responses can be theorised as specific to the dilemmas inherent in the operation of a dual sector organisation with more complex public and commercial funding arrangements. These raise questions regarding how an effective equilibrium can be achieved within the current policy positions. In many ways the original purpose of TAFE as outlined in the Kangan Report (1974) that declared the main purpose of education to be individual betterment and community good are still valid for these VET practitioners.

The unique opportunity that TAFE offers was difficult for practitioners to see continuing, which increased the risk they identified in a dual sector organisation not solely reliant on their sector. They were concerned that TAFE was being pushed by macro risk forces to convert to a self-funding model that would inevitably put community obligations and social justice objectives under threat. Practitioners were clear that it was time for serious discussion about the purpose of TAFE and a long term plan developed for the future, given its critical role in workplace skill development and community building (see HRSCEE, 2014; Beddie, Creaser, Hargreaves & Ong, 2014).

The conclusions of this research suggest that the voices of practitioners have not been sufficiently heard in response to the macro and meso and micro level dilemmas that TAFE in this dual sector organisation is confronting. VET practitioners ‘on the ground’ found it difficult to engage in policy development or locate areas in which their input may have resonance within their dual sector
environment where higher education was dominant. For many, their invisibility at the meso level posed a particular risk to the effective functioning of their practice and then to TAFE generally. Systems and processes that excluded their engagement created situations where their students and their teaching were effected. Their lack of impact on centralised systems frustrated practitioners exceedingly, adding to their sense of feeling undervalued (see also Smith, E., 2005; Chappell, 2011; Settles, 2004). For these VET practitioners the dominance of the higher education systems added significant difficulty to their day-to-day practice.

VET practitioners in this dual sector environment experienced a range of positive and negative consequences. Practitioners concurred with the conclusions of Karmel (2009), pointing out the increased complexity of dual sector arrangements. The Reform Panel’s (DEECD, 2013) observation that TAFE in dual sector organisations is contracting may reflect the complexity of the sector and the response to the instability of funding regimes that has caused organisations to begin extracting themselves from TAFE. Obvious disadvantages and heightened risks exist in the operation of an organisation with disparate conceptual, quality and regulatory frameworks (see for example, Smith & Keating, 2003; Karmel, 2011). For practitioners these were evident in the competing demands, systems, operational requirements and student cohorts that created significant divisions between the two education approaches. The Bradley Report’s (2008) recommendation to make TEQSA a regulatory body for both sectors may have made a significant difference in aligning the organisation if the federal government had pursued the changes.
On the other hand, practitioners engaged in discourses that appropriated the status of the higher education sector and the organisation’s commitment to quality. Students in particular were seen by practitioners to benefit from a qualification that carried the organisation’s university seal. All but the most cynical of practitioners believed that the organisation had a genuine and fundamental commitment to quality student education. This was a point of coalescence for TAFE and higher education in the organisation. The status of a university has been identified as a positive benefit for students in previous research (cf. Smith, E., 2005; Chappell, 2011; Harvey, 2007). Nonetheless, practitioners pointed to the increasingly commercial focus of the organisation and the risk that stance posed to their capacity to deliver quality educational outcomes in the organisation’s TAFE.

Ironically, they also pointed out that while they were concerned that the organisation may follow the dual sector trend of reducing its TAFE divisions, the organisation needed the intake pathway TAFE provided for low SES students. At the macro level it meant that the organisation could demonstrate its commitment to opening educational pathways to disadvantaged students and meet any funding requirement to include this student cohort. This observation enabled theory building that identified risk being transferred to the TAFE division for the SES intake requirements of higher education, through the extra compliance burden of pathways programs in TAFE. VET practitioners worked within pathway compliance systems that meant meeting the needs of additional marking criteria to comply with the selection processes of higher education for pathways students. They also managed supporting procedures for registration for this cohort of
students. Beyond this many VET practitioners worked hard to prepare students for the academic requirements of higher education in ways that they made not have in stand-alone TAFEs. VET practitioners were also at the forefront of managing student anxiety about their capacity and opportunity to pathway into higher education from TAFE.

VET practitioners were somewhat cynical, however, when they compared the value they added to the organisation’s capacity to attract low SES students with the acknowledgement they received for doing so. Some expressed views that amounted to risk antagonism, asserting that the organisation was only interested in using TAFE as a ‘feeder’ into higher education so that the low SES student requirements could be met.

Conversely, VET practitioners recognised the intake of low SES students as a genuine benefit for students that enabled them to move through the pathway programs to higher education relatively seamlessly within the dual sector organisation. Responding to this dilemma, VET practitioners converted the sometimes negative discourse of pathway programs being just a ‘feeder’ into the organisation’s higher education division, to pathways programs being fundamentally a social justice outcome for individual students. In this way they managed the individualisation of risk in a positive way through appropriation of the discourse. Practitioners demonstrated without exception that students were their locus of concern (as was common within the VET practitioner cohort).
Within the dual sector environment VET practitioners clearly saw their role and area of teaching as less valued in comparison to higher education, which is a view of different levels of tertiary teaching that is not unprecedented (see for example, Smith, E., 2005; Chappell, 2011; Black, 2009; Grace, 2008).

Building a theoretical understanding of this tendency opens up a space in which the role of risk converges with the theoretical approaches of symbolic interactionism. The dominance and hegemony of higher education in this dual sector organisation results in risk management strategies that VET practitioners interpret through multiple interactions in which they occupy a perceived position of less power within the organisation. Practitioners therefore perceived their position in the organisation to be much more risky and unstable than their colleagues in higher education. Nonetheless, they expressed a concern and understanding of the increasing and real pressure that their colleagues in higher education were experiencing. This reflects the results of underfunding of higher education that continue to escalate (Maten, 2011; Hil, 2012; Par, 2014).

VET practitioners experienced a dilemma in the dual sector environment that simultaneously meant they could identify a number of benefits and advantages within the context of their organisation while still forming a view that they were in the most risky position in the organisation. In particular, they recalled a number of restructures triggered by changes in government funding levels and policy settings in which it seemed to them that they bore the significant share of the organisation’s risk and negative consequences. The reactions of VET practitioners to this dilemma respond in some ways to the observations of Beck
These led to an understanding that while it is not necessarily possible to avoid all risk, there are those with greater capacity to avoid risk or minimise its impact. Beck’s (1992, 2000b; 2009a) risk theory argues that risk is individualised and addressed to those least able to pass the risk on. The differences theorised in this research are that a complex dual sector environment presents a specific set of risks for VET practitioners that they believed they were less able to manage than their counterparts in the higher education division. In other words, VET practitioners were very clear that it was much more difficult for them to avoid risk than those in positions of power within the organisation, most of whom were located within higher education.

The restructures caused by funding cuts in Victoria in recent years have resulted in a loss of knowledge in the organisation that compounded practitioner’s exposure to risk (Victorian VET Funding, 2015; Wheelahan, 2012). The view of VET practitioners was that organisational decision making was not sufficiently robust to manage the risk and impact of the restructuring that resulted in the organisation. As a consequence they believed the opportunities to use the changes to improve the delivery of VET programs was largely lost.

Nonetheless, VET practitioners demonstrated their commitment to TAFE’s community obligations by seeking to maintain student services and quality course delivery during these upheavals, often at an increased personal cost requiring extra work and added stress. Practitioners expressed strong disapproval of the ways in which TAFE has become a site of continuing and rapid change in Victoria under previous governments.
Opportunities to harness the unique community service TAFE brings to a dual sector organisation appeared, to these VET practitioners, to have been missed. That is not to say they believed TAFE structures did not need review and reform to keep pace with the needs of the community and the changing workforce (see also DEECD, 2013; Hargraves, 2003). It was rather that practitioners questioned the fundamentally risky approach of an ideology that seemed to be promoting increasing privatisation of VET as the preferred way forward.

Developing a theoretical response to the data provided by VET practitioners revealed a complex nexus between the dominance and hegemony of higher education over TAFE within the organisation. VET practitioners experienced a disconnection from the organisation and found themselves in conflict with organisational risk responses. The unnamed and unaddressed nature of risk created by two sectors operating within one organisation fostered risk antagonism in VET practitioners.

**Negotiating the tension of risk in the compliance and audit systems**

This thesis has documented theory building by utilising explanatory components of risk theory that impact the macro, meso and micro levels as they apply to the focus of this research. Using risk theory literature as one of the data sources for constant comparison within the research data has produced a distinct perspective on practitioners’ experience of organisation (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Dunne, 2011; Birks & Mills, 2011). The impact of global economic forces on the meso level generated explanatory concepts for the structures and systems that VET practitioners negotiated in their everyday experience.
Some of the complaints VET practitioners voiced related to the ways in which systems and compliance tasks competed for attention with their teaching practice and are not new (Guthrie, 2010b). The point of contention for practitioners was the point at which they perceived that they tipped over from teaching to become administration workers. This research identified additional risk in the administrative workload, caused by the duplication of systems in a dual sector organisation where higher education systems were dominant. VET practitioners also identified the increasing compliance workload that is designed to manage risk and assure quality as counter intuitively becoming a significant risk in undermining quality course delivery (refer also to Beck, 1992, 2009a). Research conducted by Starr (2012b) on school principals supports the findings of this research that risk management practices can escalate risk.

Throughout the development of this thesis it has become clear that dilemmas exist for these VET practitioners who confront disempowering compliance systems that operate to contain their role and performance in an effort to manage risk (see also Power, 2000; Stets, 2006; Burke & Reitzes, 1981). These were seen to be driven by punishing funding regimes imposed by government policy that is increasingly focused on outcomes that, according to many VET practitioners, often fail to be cognisant of the student’s experience (see also Moodie, 2012). For some students, practitioners in this research argued, just attending TAFE was a huge step forward, and course completion may be an outcome much further down the track for some students who experience mental health issues, disability or disadvantage (see also Municipal Association of Victoria, 2012). Practitioners charged their dual sector organisation with being risk averse on the one hand, but
also reflexively identified the effect of risk on their own practice. They were careful to avoid blame or become the source of compliance and audit failure that may see adverse effects on other practitioners, courses and students. In this system everyone posed some form of potential risk to each other (see also Beck, 2009b).

Beck’s (1992, 2000b, 2009a) risk theory describes the ways in which reflexive modernisation enables risk to be identified. This research concluded that for these practitioners risk in TAFE within their dual sector organisation became escalating and symbiotic risk. The unstable sector that has been TAFE in Victoria in the last decade has resulted in an increased sensitivity to risk in practitioners’ everyday practice (see Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Added to this sensitivity, practitioners highlighted the compounding difficulty that compliance created in their dual sector organisation. Practitioners with experience in non-dual sector VET RTOs asserted that the dual sector was simply more complicated when it came to compliance systems. Practitioners expressed a sense that those making decisions were often very distant and disconnected with their experiences. In the face of constricting and somewhat inflexible systems practitioners were required to maintain, they felt that they struggled to innovate and acquit their community obligations.

VET practitioners in this research identified strongly with the teaching and learning experience. They spoke at length about student learning outcomes and the intrinsic value of education. Therefore, some aspects of the compliance requirements were understood as positive and of value. The views held by VET
practitioners relating to the processes of moderation and validation demonstrated the positive nature of compliance where learning becomes the central platform of their focus. A conclusion can be drawn here that these processes also functioned, from a risk perspective, as ways to mitigate individual risk through collaborative group activity. The use of collective mitigation strategies have also been observed in other settings by Beck (2006) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, (2002).

Grounded theory building also revealed that the development of communities of practice was another mechanism through which practitioners sought to mitigate risk. The collective decision making process, information sharing, and professional support that communities of practice offered, provided a way to push back against excesses in the compliance regime and their own exposure to risk. Engaging with one another enabled them to develop and elicit support for their particular standpoints and provided a platform for collective action.

This form of risk mitigation was centred on student issues, learning needs, student engagement and achievement, which was fundamentally connected to practitioners’ training and assessment roles. Further underpinning this form of risk mitigation were elements intrinsically related to professional teaching practice, and hence they were embraced. Commonly held views amongst practitioners about the benefits of working in groups to plan, review, assess and monitor practice collectively, reflects contemporary views about effective pedagogical practice (see Fullan, & Langworthy, 2014; Hargreaves, 2003, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Leithwood, Seashore- Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).
VET practitioners perceived that risk in the audit system has also become more pronounced as increasing numbers of private RTOs have entered the sector (see also Sheehan, 2013, March 14). High profile cases of private RTOs rorting the system and failing to deliver programs that meet AQTF requirements and competency demonstration have heightened tensions (see DET, 2015b; Forward, 2014). On the one hand, VET practitioners could not understand how so many RTOs failed to deliver quality programs when audit experiences for many of them had been quite rigorous. On the other hand, VET practitioners felt auditors were too often disconnected from the teaching experience and as a result VET practitioners questioned the power exercised by some auditors whom they viewed as non-experts (Beck, 1992, 2009a; Power, 2000).

This dilemma prompted a form of risk aversion in some instances where practitioners appropriated the prevailing risk discourse and cynically ‘taught to audit’ to ensure they had sufficient evidence, even when they felt it was not the best use of students’ time. Practitioners were clear that responding to auditing required that they band together to deliver the required paper trail and collective performance. The place and value of audit, more generally, has previously been challenged (see for example, Power, 1997, 2000; Culver et al., 2011; Ball, 2003a; White, 2010). Auditors in this particular schema were seen as interlopers, disconnected from the realities of everyday practice. A barely concealed sense of resentment existed for many practitioners who questioned the value of audits as they were uncritically practiced and failed to examine what really happened in the classroom. At the heart of this tension was practitioners’ struggle to assert their
professional judgment and practice wisdom (see also Down, 2003; Starr, 2014a, 2015).

Beck’s (2009a) view that reflexivity as a critique of expert knowledge is built on distrust operated in the discourse and practice of these VET practitioners. They simply did not trust auditors to interpret the intent of their compliance documentation in ways that were cognisant of the community obligations of TAFE. Distrust by practitioners is further exacerbated by the difficulties that Hodge (2014) points out, are created through the disconnection that occurs in the interpretive space between written text and practitioner comprehension. Significant risk existed for practitioners in this interpretive space that triggers uncertainty, which in turn created an incentive for practitioners to engage in what they believed to be the required and normative performances of audits. In this way practitioners became complicit in practices that they were not wholly committed to from a sense of fear and their disempowered location as ‘addressees of risk’ in a dual sector organisation.

An additional theme that emerged in this thesis was the somewhat antithetical requirements of compliance and audit systems juxtaposed against principles of adult learning. Managing risk through compliance and audit necessitated containing performance within safe and predetermined boundaries whereas adult learning principles encourage slippage of predetermined boundaries and performances and taking risks (see also Burns, 2002, White, 2010). VET practitioners found themselves under scrutiny between these conflicting positions. This uncharted conflict created a contest over who decides risk and what it means,
that in turn allows risk antagonism to proliferate. This research identified escalating risk as a driving force adding to the stress that auditing has created for practitioners.

Beyond the challenges created by audits, practitioners identified challenges to their professional judgment and practice wisdom caused by demanding workloads. Managing risk in their everyday teaching experience meant that these practitioners felt pressured to deliver quality programs within compressed timeframes. Practitioners identified very strongly with this overarching concern of their colleagues in the sector. No practitioner in this research had experienced decreasing workload demands as a result of compliance and audit systems that have been created by the organisation to manage risk.

In fact, the conclusion that can be drawn from the data is that the workload for practitioners has escalated as reflexive modernity has created increasingly symbiotic risk (see Beck, 1992, 1999, 2000b, 2009a). Intense frustration and internal conflict ensued for many practitioners as they struggled to negotiate these unacknowledged pressures. It was particularly galling to practitioners that, at the very moment when the community needed TAFE to step up and deliver training programs for the future, the funding to the organisation was being cut and the focus of the organisation appeared to focused be steadfastly on higher education.

Practitioners railed against the notions of intense course delivery or ‘course shaving’ that diminished funding has produced (see AEU, 2013). Practitioners were clear about organisational expectations that they deliver their programs
within the budgetary restraints of the system. Consequently, the organisation’s quality discourse and their own commitment to quality became contested. This research found that, whereas quality teaching and learning were valued in the organisation, the delivery of quality programs (as evaluated by VET practitioners) was hindered in numerous ways through the compliance regime operating in the organisation. In this regard dual sector organisations were perceived by VET practitioners, who had or were working across a number of private and/or stand-alone TAFE institutes, as more complex and layered. Practitioners thereby experienced a heightened sense of anxiety and perceived that they were exposed to greater risk within the symbiotic risk containment systems of this dual sector organisation.

The personal impact of managing risk

Clear themes emerged through theory building from the research data that personal wellbeing could be negatively impacted by exposure to organisationally generated risk. Without question, one of the most significant conclusions of this research was that VET practitioners in this dual sector organisation could pay a high personal price for their commitment to TAFE’s community obligations. As addressees of risk practitioners are the individuals who must deal directly with the challenges this complex location creates on a daily basis with their relationship with students. Risk was escalated by a cohort of students who have an expectation of their engagement with TAFE as a commercial exchange, which can be very demanding of practitioners. In extreme cases some student behaviour can become bullying and create severe health and wellbeing risks for the practitioner. While the majority of interactions with students were overwhelmingly rewarding, in
those circumstances when practitioners were exposed to risky students, they felt extremely exposed and vulnerable.

Further conclusions reached through analysis of the data revealed that in most interactions with students VET practitioners dealt with a different set of risks that extended beyond a personal level to an organisational level. These included, the low English proficiency of some entry level students, or migrant and refugee background students who are insufficiently familiar with cultural expectations and inadequately inducted into educational practices. Other VET practitioners were engaged with student cohorts that included disability or significant economic disadvantage. These VET practitioners were required to manage a diverse and broad range of ages, cultural and learning requirements, which created particular stresses for them.

Another round of theory building created insight into the changes in technology that have created risks to which practitioners are now exposed to at the micro level. Practitioners accepted the inevitability of technology as a useful, relevant and potentially engaging educational tool. It is interesting to note that they reported that the introduction of online learning and technology in the last few decades has caused them to re-evaluate their course delivery strategies and prompted greater use of technology. They acknowledged that effective risk management of online learning made it possible to deliver programs to students that were flexible and engaging.
Nonetheless, while practitioners used technology, online course delivery required significant amounts of time to be invested to produce quality materials that engaged students through ‘good online pedagogy’ (Beddie, 2014, p. 32). The return on this time investment was one cause of practitioner dissatisfaction with the sole use of online approaches for some student cohorts. It appeared to them that no one has thought through the implications of exactly how specialised online resources are created, managed and the training required to use them efficiently (see also Starr, Stacey & Grace, 2011; Collins, 2013). The lack of support for VET practitioners to invest in online learning compared to that of their higher education counterparts was perceived as evidence of their subordinate position in the dual sector organisation.

In addition, VET practitioners teaching with technology made it clear that the systems underpinning technology within the organisation were often dated and not appealing to young students who had access to advanced systems. This finding was important for these practitioners, as many technology-based solutions require significant development, content management and financial investment. Practitioners felt that when high quality educational instructional design informed online learning programs they could be excellent learning tools. However, the pace and change of technology meant that practitioners needed to spend a great deal of time managing online learning (see also Beddie, 2014). Practitioners also needed to spend additional time learning new online systems and procedures.

VET practitioners were cynical that the push for online course delivery reflected an organisational notion that it was a financial panacea to contain costs in a
competitive market. They were suspicious that it would also translate into the
need for fewer practitioners with higher workloads in their division of the
organisation. Again practitioners saw themselves as addressees of risk in the
commercial online environment that required significant development time and
expertise. They could not see that online learning was as able to acquit their
community obligations if it became a mass delivered and relationship-devoid
experience for students. In risk terms these developments would further enable
risk to be pushed down to students as solely responsible for risks associated with
their learning (see also Beck, 1992, 2009b; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Undervaluing of the practitioner role was implicit in practitioners’ responses to
online programs and the propensity for using them as commercially expedient
responses to meso level risk.

As mentioned above, the opaque nature of risk within the organisation and
between its TAFE and higher education functions emerged from analysis of the
research data. This was also evident in the inability of the organisation to fully
understand the nature of training packages, which meant that VET practitioner
practices were largely inscrutable. The nature of training packages creates a point
of divergence that those outside the competency-based training environment often
fail to fully comprehend (Smith & Keating, 2003; DEECD, 2013). Subtle but
significant differences in the parameters and compliance frameworks required by
training packages for the TAFE division resulted in slippage within the
organisation’s compliance systems. VET practitioners identified these slippages
as being fundamentally due to the organisation’s higher education dominant
compliance approach to systems.
Agreement exists from other research that uncertainty and risk impact an individual’s sense of place and worth in an organisation (see for example, Wheelahan, Arkoudis, Moodie, Fredman, & Bexley, 2012). This impact became clearer through the theory building stages of this research as the sense of professional worth and place expressed by these VET practitioners reflected the risk and complexity of their dual sector environment. An antidote to this dilemma appeared to be strong VET practitioner identification with the community obligations of TAFE, which acted as a preventative factor in withstanding the challenges of the risky and chronically unstable dual sector environment.

This research constructed a picture of TAFE as a community and workforce that oscillated around an axis of risk. VET practitioners were, by virtue of their engagement in TAFE, swept into this oscillation, bringing a number of negative consequences that they must negotiate. The most fundamental of these is the impact of the unstable TAFE sector and the subsequent value this places on the role of a practitioner within the organisation (see also Forward, 2010; Simon & Bonnici, 2011; Black, 2009). Practitioners have read the cuts to government funding for TAFE as an indication of the diminished value of TAFE (see for example, AEU, 2014b). The clamour by industry for small private RTOs that are responsive, with agile structures that can react quickly to change, throws into question the purpose of the so called larger less flexible institutions. The growth in private RTOs in the experience of these practitioners has created an unacceptable risk that credentialing has become the focus of VET rather that skills development. VET practitioners identified this risk through their engagement in industry where many employers are responding to unreliable
qualifications by screening out qualifications from some institutions or skill testing potential employees to confirm the quality of their credentials.

The management of risk in an unstable TAFE sector creates other dilemmas that are of consequence for theorising VET practitioner experience. They include the avalanche of complaints and problems with private RTOs (see for example, Sheehan, 2013, March 14; Maslen, 2014, March 24; Halliday-Wynes & Misko, 2013). These have hastened the Australian Government’s tightening of legislation through amendments to the National Vocational and Education Training Regulator (NVETR) Act 2011 (Cth). Nonetheless, during the conduct and writing of this thesis, confirmation of VET practitioners’ concern has emerged as increasing risk posed by recalcitrant RTOs has come to the media’s attention (see for example, Sheehan, 2013, March 14; Maslen, 2014, March 24; Halliday-Wynes & Misko, 2013). These incidents heighten the risk for VET practitioners in this dual sector organisation who believe they suffer reputational damage by association with unscrupulous practices in the sector, which in turn inform notions about the value of VET training within the organisation.

However, it is not so much the regulatory framework, as essential as that is, that creates disquiet for practitioners. Analysing the recent paradigm shift in TAFE creates an understanding from which to build a theoretical reading of data collected in this research, linking VET practitioner identity to TAFE’s community obligations. VET practitioners’ responses to the growth of recalcitrant private RTOs can be understood as a challenge to their long held commitment to the community purpose and obligations of education and training. Successive
governments have not addressed the risk to the sector that failing to clarify the nature of, and funding for, the community obligations inherent in TAFE poses. The blatant disregard by some private RTOs for compliance and audit processes is antithetical to the experience of VET practitioners who see the behaviour of some private RTOs as an outworking of this failure. They remain incredulous that moving to contestable funding models have been treated as though these issues are unproblematic for practitioners. Some of these issues have been clearly outlined in sector reviews (see for example, DEECD, 2013; HRSCEE, 2014). Risk discourses employed by VET practitioners to differentiate RTOs who do not display community obligations as ‘other’ and ‘different’ illustrate an excluding form of risk containment.

In addition, unresolved tensions created by contradictions that oscillate around an axis of risk are particularly evident in the contradictory approaches to the casualisation of the VET workforce. Idealised notions of a casualised workforce of highly skilled practitioners providing current and industry relevant training were affirmed in a Productivity Commission Report (Productivity Commission, 2011). The TAFE Reform Panel Report noted this but pointed out there was little or no regard for the extent to which this can be achieved (DEECD, 2013). Analysing data from VET practitioners in coordination roles constructed a scenario that found tension and stress when recruiting highly skilled casual staff. Herein is the contradiction that requires practitioners to engage in insecure sessional working contracts while maintaining high levels of industry expertise that often requires long-term, full time commitment to their industry role. These binary oppositions are not remediated through organisational practices leaving the
VET practitioner to manage the associated heightened stress of course coordination.

Another key theme in this research was the unresolved and contradictory expectations of TAFE within the dual sector that encouraged a sense of ambiguity within the role of these practitioners. By virtue of their position in the TAFE system VET practitioners were repeatedly espoused as a solution to workforce problems such as youth unemployment, regardless of the fact that workforce skills development is a solution to economic demand for skills, not a singular solution to macro-economic challenges (see also Beddie, 2014). Practitioners were at the mercy of a policy debate from which they were largely excluded. A number of factors influence this exclusion including a lack of coherence within their complex professional identities. Grace (2005b, p. 228) points out that VET practitioners’ lack of a unified identity, designation and collective representation are counterproductive in a ‘regulatory environment that subjects all practitioners to increasingly restrictive compliance requirements’. The exclusion of these VET practitioners from meaningful engagement in policy development has created unjustified expectations of their capacity to provide the solutions to complex issues within the VET sector.

A central finding of theory building in this research was that as new risks are identified the oscillations around the organisation’s risk axis inevitably mean that they flow down through the organisation and impact VET practitioners. Globalised risk flowed through the organisation and impacted VET practitioners through policy changes that significantly increased risk management compliance.
Without exception every practitioner interviewed for this research reported a personal impact that included feeling stressed, frustrated by the workload or being prevented from developing the highest quality teaching practice by the organisation’s responses to risk.

A number of significant personal impacts flowed from increased workplace stress for practitioners. Clearly the health related impact of working under constant stress are well documented and can lead to negative health and wellbeing outcomes (see for example, Cohen, et al., 2012; Beyond Blue, 2014). Practitioners responded in a number of ways to micro level risk and the stress that created for them. Some worked long hours trying to keep up, others managed by only working on urgent issues, and still others left and returned to industry from where they had come. However, they reserved their greatest rancour for the organisation’s inability or unwillingness to ‘acknowledge’ the nature of their identity as VET practitioners and their commitment to TAFE’s community obligations. The commitment to TAFE’s community obligations manifested in a reticence to fail to deliver quality teaching and support to students. VET practitioners were vulnerable within the dilemma of resisting the increasing demands of the organisation and allowing this resistance to ultimately penalise students or putting themselves at personal risk through increased workloads and stress, to meet the needs of their students. These dilemmas resulted in high workloads that they struggled to negotiate.

The lack of acknowledgement of their demanding workloads appeared to be symbolic of their invisibility and the lack of worth accorded to them in their role
as VET practitioners. Nonetheless, they did also acknowledge the immense pressure their higher education colleagues also experienced within the organisation. Ultimately, a sense of risk antagonism became clear in the research data as practitioners negotiated a situation that they experienced as devaluing their professional identity (see Beck, 2000b, 2009a). This created internalised tension and conflict as they then delivered an inverse performance from their position as VET practitioners where they sought to acknowledge and validate their students’ worth.

In contrast, the components within the compliance systems that are related to teaching and learning content, such as validation and moderation, can simultaneously be instruments of positive change and development. These compliance requirements provide VET practitioners with a framework within which to explore performances that validate their sense of professional identity.

**Reflexivity and the potential for change**

It would be disingenuous to allow the voice of frustration that this research has allowed to overwhelm the positive sentiments practitioners also reported. In the midst of many difficulties within the dual sector environment, including funding cuts, restructures, complex and diverse student needs, a lack of clarity around their role, stress and high workloads, uncertain or short term employment contracts, there was an overwhelming sense of VET practitioners’ belief that their struggle was worthwhile and meaningful.
VET practice by its nature encourages reflexivity through the learning culture of review and ongoing improvement (see Jenkins, 2011; McGavin, 2013). Formal practices of review, such as communities of practice, validation, moderation and audits focus practitioners’ attention on risk inherent in their performance and practices. Practitioners found themselves negotiating the individualisation of risk by appropriating existing practices of review and reflection. These well-established activities in VET practitioners’ everyday experience can be understood as reflexive responses to the individualisation of risk. Identifying common areas of risk exposure creates an opportunity for collective action to address performance risk in ways that are not available to the individual. Reflexive examination also opens up the potential to change and responses to risk in ways that can create positive personal outcomes.

A fundamental conclusion of this research is that practitioners located in the dual sector environment of this organisation experienced risk through unexamined hegemony, disempowerment and performative forces that act to obscure the underlying individualisation of risk. The reflexive reactions of VET practitioners to these dilemmas reflects current views that the individualisation of risk is increasingly challenging (see Beck, 1992, 1994; Beck & Grande, 2010; Lee, 2006). This research has identified some of the driving forces of underlying risk within the complex dual sector environment, adding a nuanced understanding of the ways in which VET practitioners engage reflexively with the individualisation of risk. The irony of this conclusion was that while reflexivity enables risk to be identified it could also trigger increasing compliance processes that impact directly on practitioners. In this way they become generators of their own risk.
Nonetheless, VET practitioners demonstrated the capacity to challenge the ways in which risk was apportioned in TAFE within their dual sector organisation.

The debate about the purpose and value of TAFE in the VET sector calls into question its inherent community obligations. Practitioners asked, ‘What are the risks to the community of abandoning TAFE’s community obligations? How will TAFE thrive if it is not funded to support its community obligations?’ These questions open up a space for the reflexive engagement of practitioners that moves beyond the myopia of VET practitioner performance in the organisation. A development that challenges the traditional focus of VET practitioner research that Karmel (2010) identifies has focused on VET practitioner teaching and performance. Practitioners were not adverse to the need for changes in the expression and operation of TAFE in response to the needs of the community to support disadvantaged cohorts. The risk they identified was the diminishing of TAFE’s ability to respond, which is supported by Kwong Le Dow (2013, p. 55) who points out:

… weakening TAFE threatens a really significant part of the whole Australian education edifice. Not only is its sheer scale important, but as well it is the component primarily committed to extending opportunity to those less advantaged.

**Risk in the research environment and as a catalyst for further research**

The disparate requirements between TAFE and higher education are particularly clear within a dual sector organisation where research outputs are required from higher education teaching staff but not from TAFE teaching staff. Clearly, this reflects the many differences between the two sectors and has implications for understanding the risk environment in which VET practitioners operate.
Notwithstanding the inherent problems that higher education teaching staff experience with the nexus of growing demands for publishing and research outputs, they do at least have access to rich research and an examination of practice and policy issues relating to their sector. Grace (2005a, p. 10) crystallises the risk for VET practitioners identifying that ‘the tendency of VET to resist critical research can result in practitioners having limited access to research findings and approaches that would empower them to challenge existing policy directions’.

VET researchers are a unique research community in many ways as they come from an unusually multi-disciplinary mix that in turn means that the theoretical backgrounds they bring to research are not narrowly focused. The risk for VET researchers is that the field is not well developed and publishing in ‘parent disciplines’ within education or ‘grandparent disciplines’ such as psychology or sociology can mean that the research is lost to another discipline area in which practitioners may not usually engage. In addition, many VET researchers are engaged in commissioned research that is underwritten by federal and state governments or other funding bodies such as the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (see NCVER, 2015). Many of these commissioned research projects are ‘short-term’ and ‘policy-driven’ (Smith & Clayton, 2012, p. 258). While the research itself may be robust and significant, this process reduces the capacity of the relatively small VET research community to engage with broader research issues.
As a result the research provides insights and recommendations for effective practice, learning and support, as well as identifying areas for further research and investigation. An examination of existing research revealed a considerable volume of academic analysis of VET practice, although it overwhelmingly reflected a locus of interest in the techniques of educator practice. The scope of such analysis and research proved to be frequently limited to the investigation of practitioners’ skill and knowledge base (see for example, Hope, 2005; Mitchell & Ward, 2010). Critiques of VET practice remain therefore, partial, primarily locating perceived inadequacies at the level of individual practice.

For VET practitioners this has meant that many of the risks in their everyday experiences and challenges to their professional identity go unremarked. The agenda for research that does occur has traditionally focused on areas relating to teaching and learning, although this is changing as researchers expand their areas of inquiry. This research is a step in contributing to the expansion of knowledge and points to further research areas that expose the impact of risk and make visible the cost of teaching in TAFE. Further research into the ways in which TAFE’s community obligations are constricted and rendered mute within the current marketised workforce development systems may provide useful insights that challenge the myopic views policy makers appear to have of the sector, as perceived by VET practitioners.

Risk is implicit in the developing policy shifts within government-sponsored research identified by Harris, and Clayton, (2010). They outline alternative models to manage the increasing requirement that research impact is
demonstrated in increasingly prescribed ways. Nonetheless, this requirement is part of a risk management strategy that is replicated across many government-funded sectors as part of the growing imperative to demonstrate return on investment (see Department of Social Services, 2015). Identifying risk and its impact acts as a catalyst for further research to make visible the specific challenges facing the sector and VET practitioners working within it. This thesis indicates that ongoing VET research must contend with a period of rapid change and increasing diversity in VET practitioner identity (McGavin, 2013).

The conclusions presented in this chapter demonstrate opportunities for further research, at the same time they reveal an urgent need for VET practitioners to confront the ways in which risk impacts their practice and professional identity. Research such as this can play an important part in making visible the impact of risk and its impact at macro, meso and micro levels on VET practitioners. However, VET practitioners can also act collectively and individually to respond in positive ways to their experience of the impact of risk.

**Recommendations for further action**

The following recommendations are provided to outline potential actions that may flow from this research. They are provided to crystallise areas of advocacy, research and action that reflect the insight and ideas of the VET practitioners who participated in this research.

1. An increased VET practitioner involvement in high-level policy development to ensure a strong connection to their practice wisdom
and knowledge is included such that policy developments avoid unintended negative consequences and the production of intended results.

2. Sponsorship at ministerial level of a robust collaborative mechanism within the sector to promote collective identity for VET practitioners, acknowledging the skills and training required for the role and supporting adequate training, development and qualification levels for best practice.

3. Increased opportunities for VET practitioners to engage in communities of practice as part of their professional development to manage risk and develop professional learning networks.

4. Collective pressure from VET practitioners and their education unions on state and federal governments to ensure long term planning for the sector to ensure stability and sustainability.

5. Increased engagement, funding and support for VET practitioners in VET research to develop a robust research community that has the capacity to expand areas of research focus beyond those already undertaken.

6. Engaging public support for TAFE’s community obligations through strong advocacy campaigns that utilise related professional associations and relevant education unions.
VET practitioners in this research have provided new insights into the ways in which risk within a dual sector organisation impacts negatively on their professional identity, their relationships with students and potentially their personal wellbeing. The positive corollary has also been demonstrated by VET practitioners, in this dual sector setting, through reflexive practice and the promotion of a risk discourse that identifies relinquishing TAFE’s community obligations as a totally unacceptable risk.
Reference List


AEU (Australian Education Union)


AQF (Australian Qualifications Framework)

AQTF (Australian Quality Training Framework)


ASQA (Australian Skills Quality Authority)


AWPA (Australian Workplace and Productivity Agency)


COAG (Council of Australian Governments)


DEECD (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development)


DEEWR (Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations)


DET (Department of Education and Training)


HESG (Higher Education and Skills Group)


HRSCEE (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment)


ISC (Industry Skills Council)


NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education and Research)


NSSC (National Skills Standards Councils)


Senate EWRSBE Committee (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee).


TEQSA (Tertiary Education and Quality Standards)


VRQA (Victorian Registrations and Qualifications Authority)


# Qualification details

LMT21207 - Certificate II in Leather Production

## Summary

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## Units of competency

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<td>Follow defined OH&amp;S policies and procedures</td>
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<td>Apply quality standards</td>
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<td>Work in the Textiles, Clothing and Footwear industry</td>
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<td>LMTGN2004B</td>
<td>Work in a team environment</td>
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<td>Perform minor maintenance</td>
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<td>Perform test or inspection to check product quality</td>
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<td>Select, transfer and remove materials and products</td>
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<td>LMTGN2008B</td>
<td>Coordinate work of team or section</td>
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<td>LMTGN2009B</td>
<td>Operate computer technology in a textiles, clothing and footwear workplace</td>
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<td>LMTGN2100B</td>
<td>Perform tasks to support production</td>
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<td>Undertake receipt, storage, handling and preservation of materials or products</td>
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<td>Perform fleshing processes</td>
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<td>Operate machines to prepare hides or skins for tanning</td>
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<td>Operate machines to crust hides, skins or leather</td>
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<td>Sort, grade or class hides, skins or leather</td>
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<td>Slice leather pieces</td>
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<td>Use sustainable energy practices</td>
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<td>MISS40061A</td>
<td>Apply competitive systems and practices</td>
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<td>Staadum process improvements</td>
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<td>Manage the impact of change on own work</td>
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<td>MISS40061A</td>
<td>Apply quick changeover procedures</td>
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<td>Apply jest in Time procedures</td>
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<td>MISS40061A</td>
<td>Apply cost factors to work practics</td>
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<td>MISS40061A</td>
<td>Interpret product costs in terms of customer requirements</td>
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<td>MISS40061A</td>
<td>Apply 5S procedures</td>
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<td>Monitor process capability</td>
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<td>Use planning software systems in operations</td>
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**Classifications**

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Participant Questions

Date: 2013
Full Project Title: Risk in the VET practitioner’s teaching experience and professional identity.

Question
1. Please tell me about your role as a vocational educator.
   • Campus location
   • How long you have worked for the organisation in vocational education.
   • Your role in the organisation.
   • Strategic developments during your time in the organisation.
   • Any relationships to other providers in the sector.

2. What do you understand the term ‘risk management’ to mean?

3. Please outline what you think are the major risks for:
   • The division
   • Your role as a vocational educator
   • The VET sector generally

4. How do the major risks you have identified correspond or differ to those identified by the organisation?

5. What type of risk management activities are you doing in your everyday work?

6. Are the organisation’s systems and procedures (including documentation) useful or detrimental to your role and function as a vocational educator?

7. What effect do audit process have on how you need to manage risk/compliance as a vocational educator?

8. What have been the most significant changes to your identity as an educational leader during your time at the organisation?

9. To what extent have these changes come from within the organisation as opposed to having been imposed externally?

10. Have any of these changes caused a significant change in the way you view or feel about yourself as a vocational educator?

11. Would you like to add anything further to your understanding of your identity as a vocational educator?

12. Is there anyone else that may have data/documents useful to this project that you would like to recommend be contacted.