**Karen’s 3MT talk 2015**

How would you feel if I told you that we could no longer guarantee the integrity of infrastructure that we take for granted every day? No doubt, some of you would have a crossed bridge, or maybe caught the train to get to work today, but have you ever given a second thought to the strength of that bridge you crossed, or the possibility that the running gear on that train could collapse because it hasn’t been maintained properly? But for engineering tradespeople whose work involves the building and maintenance of critical structures the quality of their workmanship *is* critical for public safety. Now I’d like you to consider for a moment what it may mean for society should the quality of education we offer those tradespeople should begin to decline.

My research investigates how the quality of engineering trade training has been impacted by changes to education policy and industry through the voices of very experienced engineering trade teachers from around Victoria; some of whom were involved in the building of the Westgate at the time of this collapse.

Over the past few decades, globalisation, a downturn in manufacturing, and ideologies about markets in education have come together to produce an environment which is placing pressure on educators to reduce the scope and content of training they can actually deliver to apprentices. And this is occurring both at TAFE and in the private training sector.

But what does it mean for tradespeople and public safety when we start talking about “cutting down”, “narrowing” and “reducing”, the content of training? At what point, do the forces of reduction impact the very competence of the graduates that we’re sending out into the world of work?

We’ve all heard about “skills shortages” *and* the swag of dodgy-brothers training providers that seemed to pop up overnight handing out their trade certificates at lightning speed in exchange for fistfuls of government funding. Sure this method produced more “qualified tradespeople” but did anyone stop to consider the actual substance of these qualifications, or the future implications for the industry or public safety?

Without substance, qualifications become meaningless, and their value is lost. The sector stands accused of “dumbing down” and “deskilling” apprentices; to the point where the old toolmakers’ adage “screwed, blued and tattooed” could be thought to sum up the situation rather appropriately.

My research aims to not only capture and reveal the extent of damage already afflicting apprenticeship training, but to argue the case for reversing this trend before skills cease to be passed from master to apprentice, and concepts of craftsmanship are forever lost to the annals of Australian industrial history.