

Research Today

RESEARCHERS' MAGAZINE FROM THE AUSTRALIAN VET RESEARCH ASSOCIATION



Editor: Erica Smith
Editorial assistant: John Rosser

Issue 2:
April 2007

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Message from the AVETRA President

The response to the first edition of AVETRA's *Research Today* has been overwhelmingly positive. The content and the presentation reflect a new energy about exploring issues in VET research that is a very welcome development. Its accessibility and "reader friendly" format has also performed a new function in bringing information to AVETRA members, many of whom are pressed for time but interested in getting the latest news in VET research. I congratulate Erica Smith and the team putting together the new AVETRA *Research Today*.

This revival of *Research Today* in a new form represents a new maturity in the VET research community as discussion and debate about the field of VET research enters new dimensions. Discussions on quality, impact and the utility of research and its links with policy within the research community are evidence of a new interest in VET research as a field of study in itself. I express this as "research about VET research". The first edition of *Research Today* was an excellent example of this and the second edition carries on this precedent.

This shift is a heartening development and in the AVETRA submission to the NCVET research priorities the need to build VET research as a specialist form of research and as a source of scholarly investigation was suggested. It is important that the developments over the last decade are captured, documented and analysed. In some cases there will be areas for critique and in other cases spaces for congratulation and pride in achievements in VET research. One of these heartening and unique developments is the emergence of AVETRA in 1997 and its consolidation as an association run by its members that is able to sponsor such forums as *Research Today*.

From AVETRA's position the preservation of a critical mass of researchers and a research community is an important aspect of a vibrant and innovative VET sector. One other important part of the submission to NCVET was a recognition of the urgency to ensure that the developments of the last 10 years in VET research as well as AVETRA are continued and transferred to a new generation of researchers. Training, recruiting and developing career paths for researchers is going to be a continuing challenge for many VET sector organizations, national research bodies, trainers as well as AVETRA itself. The role of such publications such as *Research Today* should not be underestimated in both consolidating the critical mass of researchers and keeping them at the cutting edge of research practices, findings and theories but it also has a role in stimulating a sense of inquiry in those that might be the next generation researchers. As AVETRA celebrates its 10th anniversary we are mindful of the need to continue to build on the achievements of the past to secure a role for a vibrant and sustainable VET research community into the next decade. I am convinced that developments such as *Research Today* and its content are part of that pathway to the future.

Peter Kell
President AVETRA

Message from *Research Today* editor

We welcome contributions from members of AVETRA to 'Research Today'. Contributions should preferably be 500 words or less and should focus on VET researchers, researching and the impact of research. Please send your contribution to me at esmith@csu.edu.au, or if you wish you may phone first to discuss your idea, on 02-6933 2087.

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ISSN 1441 3183 3

Links between research and policy

We have invited two authors who write on the above topic to provide us with short articles that summarise some of their findings. These two articles are quite different in focus and we are sure that *Research Today* readers will find much to interest them.

▲ The Impact of Educational Research and Development on VET Policy and Practice

Chris Selby Smith

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No one-to-one relationship between research and development (R&D) and decision-making generally is accepted, although individual studies can have an impact. There are differences between the R&D and decision-making domains; and important linkages between them.

Three areas: Reviewing the impact of R&D on decision-making in VET requires consideration of three areas: VET decision-making; R&D; and the linkages between them. Note that the literature on linkages is sparser than that on decision-making or R&D; and that linkages can be direct or indirect (including through public opinion and community pressures on both researchers and decision-makers).

Impact: R&D's impact on decision-making incorporates two elements: "use" (whether the R&D served a particular decision-making purpose, such as to solve a problem, as a weapon in political or bureaucratic conflict, or to improve conceptual understanding); and "influence" (whether the R&D made a difference to the decision which was made). Note that R&D can be "used" in decision-making even if it had no "influence".

Levels of decision-making: Three levels are distinguished: national and State/Territory level; individual provider organizations; and VET practitioners. There tend to be similarities with the analytical framework applying at each level. However, there are also differences. For example, the various stages of the policy process tend to be less separate for practitioners, while decisions are more affected by the timing of R&D evidence at the policy levels than among practitioners. Also practitioner R&D tends to be more integrated with local knowledge and practical experience than at the other two levels, but contribute less to the accumulating body of knowledge available to other decision-makers and researchers.

Improving the relationship: R&D *does* have an impact on decision-making, but not in the way many people think. For example, the R&D enterprise is accumulative, so that at any given time certain ideas or ways of thinking are "in good currency", while others are not. Also, it is often overlooked that the R&D system's outputs include research skills and attitudes, and trained personnel (as well as new

knowledge and the application of existing knowledge in new ways).

In general, the *extent* of R&D's influence on decision-making cannot be evaluated quantitatively. The different *types* of R&D can be used in various decision-making contexts (and have varying levels of visibility to potential users). R&D's use and influence depend critically on the circumstances of decision-making in a particular *context* and the linkages between R&D and decision-making there. Experience demonstrates various *uses* of R&D in decision-making at different times; and the specific form of use is not always explicit.

Importantly, the extent to which R&D is used and has influence in decision-making can be *enhanced* by the actions of stakeholders. This places responsibilities on both decision-makers and on researchers. For example, a strong preference by users for R&D that is short term and instrumental can, in the longer term, weaken the R&D base. Similarly, a weakening network of effective linkages undermines R&D's potential use in VET decision-making and its likely influence. There appears to be a danger of this happening now.

This brief article draws on three earlier publications (below) to which the reader can refer for more extensive discussion, seventeen VET case studies and other Australian, North American and European studies.

Selby Smith, C., Hawke, G., McDonald, R. and Selby Smith, J. (1998). *The Impact of Research on VET Decision-making*, NCVET, Adelaide.

Selby Smith, C. ed. (1999). *The Impact of R&D on VET Decision-making: A range of case studies*, NCVET, Adelaide.

Selby Smith, C. (2006). "The impact of educational R&D in the Australian VET sector", in *The Australian Educational Researcher-Special Issue*, April, pp 133-145.

▲ Systematic Reviews – not just another literature review.

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Systematic Reviews are now a popular tool that policy makers and practitioners use to inform their practice. You may have noticed that their reports and executive summaries read differently from other research reports. So, what exactly is a Systematic Review (SR) and how are they different to other research or literature reviews? The primary features of SRs are outlined here:

1. **Clearly identified research focus and well-defined research question/s for the review** – application of SR principles requires a clearly

articulated research focus and most often this is framed in the form of a research question.

2. **Comprehensive literature search** - the search is meticulous and comprehensive; details of the search are to be outlined in the review, including: the search strategy, the data bases searched, the key words used, and the number of articles identified before exclusion and quality criteria are applied. The search may be limited to a certain historical period (limited by years) or characteristics of the subjects (eg limit to children/ages) however such details are provided so that the search is presented in a transparent way.
3. **Development & application of inclusion criteria** - after the initial trawl for literature the papers are examined in a preliminary sense, some papers are excluded because they are not appropriate to the research focus. Clear inclusion criteria need to be established which are used to delimit the research. For example, a SR on youth suicide included criteria stating "the majority (>90%) of the study participants were between 12 and 20 years" and "the study participants had answered a self-report questionnaire". Guides for such criteria are provided by the various international authorities on SRs.
4. **Development & application of quality rating system** - in addition to the inclusion criteria mentioned above, the methodology of the research papers is subject to critical examination. A framework of research quality appropriate for the various methodologies needs to be developed. In some cases research is scored or ranked according to methodological strength. Research that does not meet minimum quality criteria is excluded from final analyses.
5. **Synthesis & meta-analysis** – the final, high quality studies are synthesised to produce the best possible answer for the research question/s. Studies may be 'mapped' out, so that the field of literature is described in terms of types of studies, country of origin, and other relevant trends. Where possible meta-analytical methods are applied to synthesise findings of the finalist papers/literature. The nature of such analyses must be appropriate to the methodological character of the papers; experimental findings, for example, can be subject to statistical meta-analysis, however ethnographical studies will require more qualitative synthesis and meta-analysis.

Thus SRs are not simply literature reviews. The research papers and literature examined are treated as primary data in this type of study and are the data are analysed according to well-established methodological principles. SRs require the application of rigorous systematic methods and the research teams need to be able to recognise and

competently assess the quality of research produced through a wide range of methodologies. Although SRs evolved in medical fields (Mulrow, 1994; Aklberg, 2005) and initially focused on experimental studies, particularly Randomised Control Trials, recent SRs in social science have included qualitative research (Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Jones, Young, Sutton, 2005). Several internationally accepted guidelines are available and there is ongoing research into review methods. See the following references for further information:

Aklberg, A. (2005) Evidence based child health 3: Understanding systematic reviews. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*. Vol. 90: 840-844

Dixon-Woods, M., Agarwal, S., Jones, D., Young, B., Sutton, A. (2005) Synthesising qualitative and quantitative evidence: A review of methods. *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*. Vol. 10: 45-53

Mulrow, C.D. (1994) Systematic reviews: Rationale for systematic reviews. *British Medical Journal*. Vol. 309: 597-599

<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org>

<http://www.york.ac.uk>

<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk>

VET research theses 2006

The VET sector produces many excellent researchers and research products. Unfortunately, though, the excellent work produced for theses written for PhDs, EdDs and Masters degrees does not always become as widely known as it deserves. We invited AVETRA members to submit details of such theses completed in 2006, and received a number of submissions. Several are included below and the remainder will be showcased in the next edition of *Research Today*. You are invited to contact the authors for more information.

▲ Policy making and the Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Education Pathways in Victoria 2000-2004.

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Abstract: In January 2000 the Victorian government established a 'Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Education Pathways in Victoria'. This explores the work of this Ministerial Review using an organisational discourse approach to the policy-making process. The study examines how the initial problem was represented that required policy intervention. I ask what the Brack's Victorian State Government defined, understood and represented the 'problem' to be regarding young people's participation in post-compulsory education. The research then focuses on establishing how the Ministerial Review set out to

validate the initial representation of the problem. The research then concentrates on how the Ministerial Review came to develop its policy recommendations to address the policy problems it had identified. This involves establishing what solutions to the 'problem' were proposed by the Ministerial Review panel and why they were recommended as policies. Finally this study evaluates the value of the Ministerial Review process.

Complete document is available in the public domain by accessing:

<http://adt.lib.rmit.edu.au/adt/uploads/approved/adt-VIT20061115.101745/public/02whole.pdf>

▲ Situated Learning: perceptions of training practitioners on the transfer of competence across workplace contexts

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Abstract: This research thesis is focused on the question: "How do practitioners understand the transfer of competence (that is, what they know and can do) across different workplace contexts and how does it influence their practice?"

The research investigates the experiences and perceptions of 108 workers, who have changed jobs or whose jobs have changed, as to how they were able to adapt what they knew and could do at that time. The research is phenomenological, using a methodology designed to collect and analyse data from the participants without decontextualising it. The methodology is customised and contextualised and uses activity theory, Engeström's theory of expansive learning, grounded theory and discourse analysis to interrogate the research question.

The collection of data occurred over a period of five years and was in two stages, with the second stage validating and building on the first stage.

Minimally structured interviews and a questionnaire were the main data collection tools used. Some descriptive statistics have been used but the research is qualitative in intent.

The research draws on current theoretical positions of learning, transfer, experiential learning, workplace learning, activity theory, qualitative research and reflection on experience. The thesis has been written to foreground the voices of the participants and the insights their experience brings to the research.

The research addresses a current gap in research work, carried out in Australia or overseas, which focuses on the transfer of competence across workplaces. The outcomes provide new perspectives on the ways in which practitioners understand transfer and integrate these

interpretations into their practice. It strengthens the notions of consequential transfer and generalisation without decontextualisation, and thus makes a contribution to our collective knowledge and understanding.

The outcomes of the research are a metaphoric framework to guide the transfer of competence over different work contexts; a record of the application of new understandings of transfer as a sequence of consequential transitions (Beach 1999); generalisations derived from the embedding of contexts (Van Oers 1998); and an innovative research methodology. In addition, the participants have provided their perspectives on the preparation of, and on-going support for, people entering or crossing workplace contexts, and the consequential, necessary changes to institutional learning.

▲ Innovation – Rhetoric and realities

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Abstract: Governments say that innovation is the key to economic prosperity and wellbeing. Much of the policy emphasis focuses narrowly on innovation in science and technology. Yet innovation is not restricted to these fields. It is particularly evident in the arts although there is little policy recognition of this, or indeed, of the arts industry. These developments raise the question, how can vocational education in the arts contribute to the national innovation agenda? The purpose of this thesis is to investigate conceptions of innovation embedded in government policy that are currently driving the emergence of the knowledge economy and what they mean for Vocational Educational and Training (VET) and, specifically in the arts. This thesis is informed by previous study undertaken for my Masters degree, my professional experience and training as an artist and designer and my experience as a VET educator. I draw primarily on the theoretical perspective of Donna Haraway, particularly her work related to cyborgs and situated knowledges to make sense of the hierarchies and dualities that impact on the 'race to innovate'. I also draw from an interview conducted with an artist/designer and from case studies of two artists, Stelarc and Hubert Duprat to inform this thesis. This study finds that dualistic and hierarchically differentiated policy is not conducive to the development of a culture of innovation. This research also reveals that art education can facilitate innovation by developing characteristics of art thinking and acting.

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