

Contributions of VET to regional communities

Sue Kilpatrick, Susan Johns and Ted Rosenblatt
Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia
University of Tasmania

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INTRODUCTION

What contributions does vocational education and training make to social and economic needs in regional communities? This paper reports some findings from the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia's ANTA funded project *Managing Change Through VET: The Role of Vocational Education and Training in Regional Australia*.

Many communities in regional areas are being forced to change as a result of a decline in income from agriculture and withdrawal of government, banking and other services (Productivity Commission 1999, Houghton 1997). Work on the learning society emphasises the link between learning and responsiveness to change (Schuller & Field 1998, Young, 1995). Adoption of new ways of thinking and new ways of doing things are learning processes during which people, individually and as groups (including communities), develop new knowledge, skills and values (Kilpatrick, Bell & Falk 1999). Learning assists in managing change by building on accepted knowledge and practices (Lundvall 1992). Cranton (1994) suggests that change can be triggered by new information which conflicts with an individual's previously accepted knowledge. A learning process follows during which values change and the new information is accepted.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role VET can play in helping communities manage changing economic and social needs. Economic needs are taken to include income-generating activities such as employment, self-employment and running businesses. Social needs are taken to be the non-economic aspects of wellbeing, including health, and cultural, community and other social activities. We acknowledge these needs are interrelated.

The scope of VET covered in this project is: structured training and assessment under the Australian Recognition Framework (formal VET); training which is structured, but not under the Australian Recognition Framework (nonformal VET); and training which occurs incidentally, as people go about their daily lives (informal VET). While this paper draws on data collected in regional communities, it is possible that the findings would also apply in metropolitan areas.

METHODOLOGY

Data were gathered through individual or focus groups interviews with a total of 466 people from seven regions. Questionnaires were also completed by most interviewees. Interviewee selection was informed by the five objectives in *A Bridge to the Future: Australia's National Strategy for VET 1998-2003* (ANTA 1998). These objectives were used to identify specific issues and groups as foci for the different sites. For example, the purposive sampling strategy deliberately sought respondents from four groups in each of the seven regions: organisations concerned with formal VET provision; employers; representatives of community organisations; and finally learners or community members. Questions sought information and perceptions about:

- changes in the community and their impact on individuals and organisations;
- recent VET experiences focusing on their contributions to social and economic wellbeing;
- interactions related to VET among individuals, enterprises, VET providers, and community organisations;
- people's perceptions about future VET needs.

Interview data were analysed using a combination of NUD*IST, thematic analyses and ethnomethodological analyses using a range of techniques. Standard statistical procedures were applied to the questionnaire data.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF VET

The wide range of contributions that VET makes to regional Australia are grouped into two categories: contributions in terms of 'capacity-building' outcomes for individuals and communities, and more 'tangible' or realised outcomes, in relation to employment and community activity. Human capacity in terms of skills and confidence and community capacity, including networks and the ability to have vision as a community, have been identified as essential for community economic development (Allen 1999, Ekins & Newby 1998, Kretzmann & McKnight 1993).

Capacity

Findings from the seven study sites indicated that capacity building gave individuals and communities the knowledge, skills and attitudes to better manage change. The data identified four main areas in which VET helps build capacity within communities: skill acquisition, promoting self-efficacy, networking and support, and job readiness. These capacities are drawn on as more tangible outcomes are realised.

Skill acquisition was referred to in over half the interviews and self-efficacy, networks (or interaction) and job readiness were mentioned as outcomes of VET in over 20%. While skill acquisition and job readiness may be considered planned outcomes, self-efficacy and networks of interaction were often incidental outcomes, although a third of those surveyed who were enrolled in a course had done so at least partly for personal development reasons. The 'incidental outcomes' were highly valued by participants and employers.

Generic skills can be used across boundaries of tasks, for example communication and organisational skills. Specific skills are not generally transferable across tasks, for example fish feeding or applying chemicals. There were frequent mentions of generic skills acquired through training intended to develop specific skills.

Aspects of increased self-efficacy include confidence to socialise, increased self-esteem, confidence to speak in public, confidence in ability to do things, and confidence to try something new. When individuals have gained both skills and self-efficacy they are better equipped to assess and find ways of meeting their social and economic needs.

As individuals and communities go about learning in a variety of informal, nonformal and formal VET contexts, opportunities for networking, interaction and support occur. Such interactions are important as they may: fill a void in small communities which offer few other social or employment opportunities; contribute to individuals' positive perceptions of their abilities and value to the community; help alleviate negative community perceptions of isolation and remoteness, and contribute to community cohesiveness by bringing together sometimes diverse groups within the community to work together to achieve common goals.

Youth in particular, benefited from VET programs that prepared them for the world of work. Their 'job readiness' meant they were more likely to stay in their community because they were able to secure employment, thus building up valuable community resources. This is in contrast to the drain of rural youth to cities common in much of Australia (Wahlquist 1999).

Employment-related and community activity outcomes

Tangible outcomes that extended beyond capacity building were related mainly to employment or community activity. Other tangible outcomes identified included VET graduates teaching others, or continuing with further education and training. Just over a quarter of all interviews mentioned at least one realised, tangible outcome from VET, mostly employment-related.

Over half of those who had enrolled in a VET course had done so for professional or vocational development reasons, consistent with most of the outcomes reported being employment-related. Employment-related outcomes included obtaining a job, starting a business, employing others and improved performance in an existing job. A match between training in emerging or expanding local

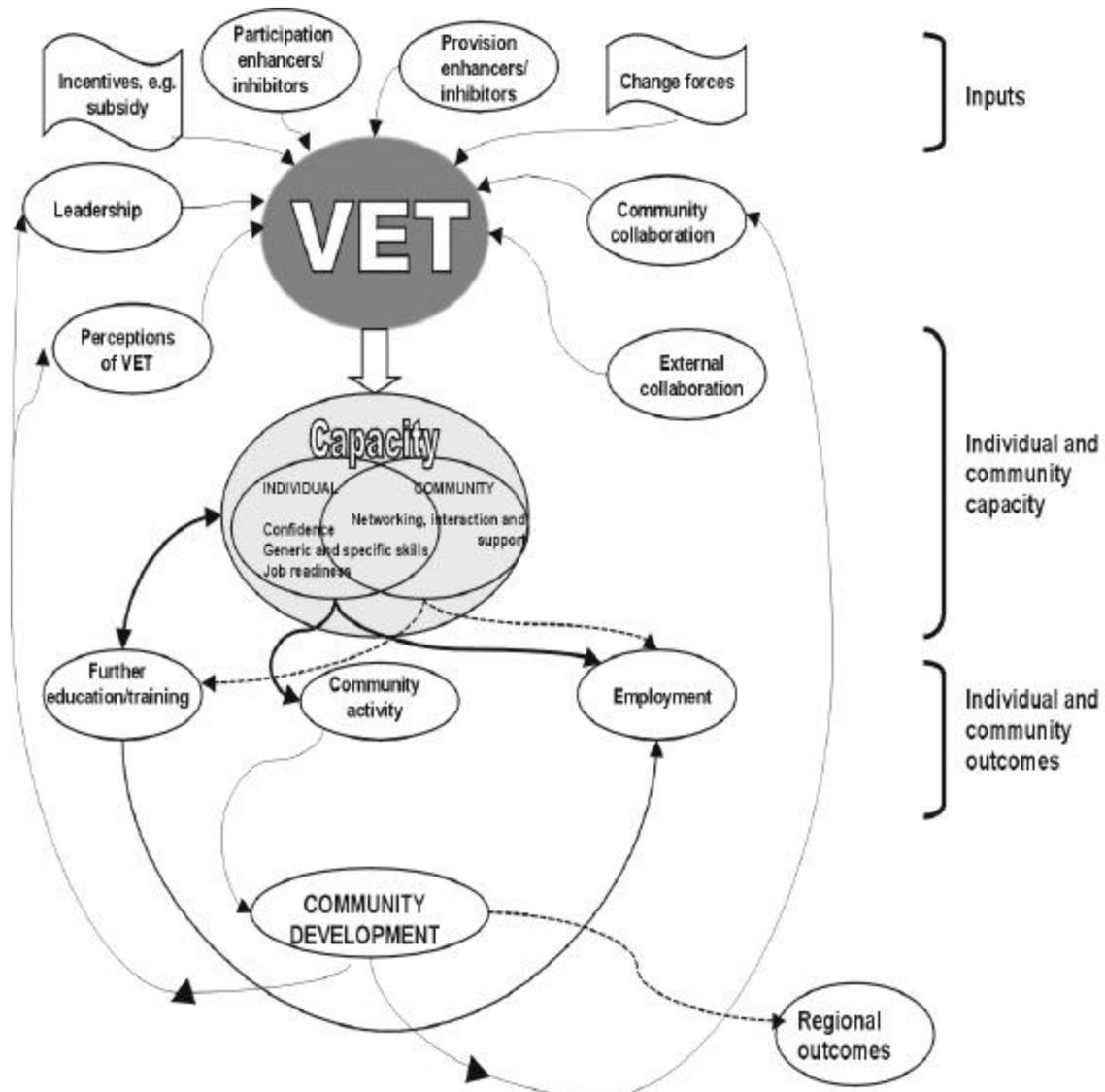
industries and employment was observed at most sites. That is, training that met the economic needs of the community was more likely to lead to jobs.

The second major group of outcomes related to community activities. These were either an individual contributing to the community in a way he or she had not contributed previously, or whole-community benefits. Collectively these activities are known as community development. Some of these outcomes were economic activities that had spin-offs for the whole community, others were events such as festivals and ceremonies that enhanced the social cohesion, and met the social needs, of the community.

CAPACITY TO OUTCOMES

Figure 1 below illustrates the process whereby VET contributes to employment and community outcomes by building capacities. It shows that capacities are drawn upon in the production of outcomes for communities and the individuals who live in them.

Figure 1: VET's contribution to regional communities



The diagram also shows the factors that influence the extent to which VET is effective in contributing to regions, communities and individuals. The influencing factors identified in this project are leadership, individual and community perceptions of VET, participation enhancers and barriers, provision enhancers and barriers, collaboration or partnerships within the community, and external collaboration or partnerships. Exogenous factors including change forces and policy incentives and inhibitors (for example, subsidies) can also influence the extent of VET's contribution to communities.

The following four vignettes show how VET contributes to individuals, communities and regions by building capacity, and how the capacities result in tangible outcomes. They highlight some of the factors that influence capacity building and the ability of communities to turn capacities into outcomes.

Spin-offs from skills development

The first vignette tells how an employer in the orchard industry arranged for training that has benefited not only those who participated and their initial employer, but also other employers in the orchard and other industries, and so the wider community and region.

Skills not present were acquired by engaging a provider from outside the community:

Respondent: We got people in from the TAFE [in another town].
Interviewer: And so none of that training was available locally?
Respondent: No, no that was a scheme I thought up...

The newly acquired skills enhanced the capacity of the individuals and the business. Outcomes followed in the form of employment and promotion for the individuals who trained and reduced staff turnover:

Some of those people that were on the first training course are now key personnel, they are a leading hand, supervisors and that...there's a lot of people that have benefited from it.

The capacity of other employers, industries and available skills in the community as a whole, grew:

They've gained employment not only for this industry but it's actually gone into other industries...

Further outcomes of the VET course were better performance on-the-job for the initiating employer and other industries in the region:

[they've] not only [benefited] myself here but they have moved to other sheds, farms and they've got the ability to walk in and do a job. So it was very beneficial not only to this industry but to other industries as well.

One employer taking a leadership role by initiating training has led to increased capacity and tangible outcomes for the whole community. The outcomes were achieved through drawing on resources external to the community (a TAFE).

Bitten by the learning bug

The second vignette is about a woman who found that a typing course gave her the self-confidence to go on to university. She went on to do three different kinds of voluntary community work (domestic violence counselling, army cadets and tourist work) and undertook other training to gain skills for her voluntary activities. This extract describes only a part of her training and community work journey.

Her journey started with a 'push' from government welfare policy:

I was on sole parent benefits and [CES] were suggesting go and get some skills to enable you to get back into the workforce...

The course built her personal capacity, particularly her self-confidence. From the course she got:

....the confidence to get back out into the world....I'd been out of the workforce for a fair while and didn't really need to [work], but then when I found myself alone raising two children, my confidence was-I just didn't have any...I didn't have a social network of people...

Her capacity grew as she learnt new communication skills, but it was self-confidence that enabled her to enrol at university:

I'll tell you what else came from that [increased confidence]-the fact that I'm going to uni now... We learned communication on the phone, and one of our exercises was to ring a university and just ask for some information. And all little things like that got me thinking ...it was only six months later that I was enrolled at uni...If I hadn't done that I'd probably still be here wondering what I was going to do with my life...

Her university studies led to training in counselling, and these skills resulted in a tangible outcome, voluntary community work that benefited victims of domestic violence:

... at that point they were setting up the court support systems for victims of domestic violence. And they actually trained a fair few of us to do voluntary work down there...I'm still on the advisory committee...[We] are still trying to set it up to run better all the time...

The woman plays a leadership role through membership of the advisory committee; leadership skills available to and used for the community are a further outcome of her education and training journey.

She went on to describe becoming an adult leader in the local army cadet unit, and training provided by the army, then talked about another voluntary community role and its associated training:

I did some voluntary work with [local tourist centre] and they run the Aussie Host course. And because when I'm in the office I'm dealing with people that come in, I felt that it was important for me...to have their training. So I did it and learned a lot from it. It's a good course more about people skills and dealing with people...

She had a very positive perception of VET, and so completed the Aussie Host course and acquired more skills (capacity) which have a community activity outcome. It is not difficult to see from the interview transcript that the community's tourist industry benefits economically from having her many generic and job-specific skills in the tourist centre. Her community has many reasons to value the capacity building contribution of VET.

Seniors in cyber space help their community

This project was initiated as a community activity by the local Council and Library staff, who secured funding. They located existing capacity in the community (computer skills), and arranged training that built further skills:

Senior citizen: They asked me whether I'd be interested in joining their group and to see if we could put some Web pages on the Net...the group comprised of about 25 people over 50, and then because [a member] and I knew a little bit about computing, we were asked if we would assist with designing pages...

Library staff: We actually gave them a little bit of a crash course, with Internet...because a lot of them had never really touched a computer before and certainly never accessed the Internet...

The capacity of the senior citizens grew as they developed a support network. In an example of fostering distributed leadership in the community, the Library staff gradually handed the project over to the senior citizens as their capacity (skills, self-efficacy and networks) developed. The Web pages were one tangible outcome, another was that the senior citizens passed their newly acquired skills on to others in neighbouring communities, building the capacity of the region:

Library staff: [It] was a matter of getting them comfortable enough, to that level that they felt able to demonstrate to other people without us holding their hand...They grew to depend on each other as a group...[their] skills were quite varied but they are very willing to share....they actually support each other a lot better because they've had that social interaction.

Senior citizen: We did demonstrations at [two small rural towns] and they are very, very interested there, and they've also put up Web pages.

The project built social cohesion by bringing old and young people together to share information and skills.

Library staff: We took two car loads of people from that group [to rural town A], and we...showed [the Web project] to school children...that was the real intergenerational stuff...you had these Year 9, 10 and 11 kids standing there talking to a 75 year old man about htmls and jpegs...We just wandered to the background and let them take over. And then we had the older people that came in the afternoon, and the response was terrific.

The outcomes of the project included improved health for at least one member of the group. The Library staff conclude by describing the value of the capacity in the form of networks that the project and training the Council and Library staff initiated:

Library staff 1: One gentleman...he had had a stroke,...and his confidence at the start of the project was almost like 'I don't think I can cope with this'. He was one who came to all of our outreach visits,...I look at him and I think, well his confidence and his fighting: this whole thing has really, really helped him along.

Library staff 2: They go to other clubs and other organisation meetings and they all have this get together and they just talk about [the Web project], it's become a real togetherness thing, and it's a real prize.

The outcomes of VET were not only a frequently used Web site and use of Web for personal benefit, but capacity. The capacity (skills, self-efficacy and networks) meant that skills were passed on to others in neighbouring small rural towns, who went on to build their own Web sites. Ongoing networking means this community now has the capacity for further collaborative development.

Collaboration, distance and lack of jobs

A regional VET-in-schools program in an area of high youth unemployment is the subject of the final vignette. The outcomes here are not as rosy as those in the first three vignettes, and there were more barriers to be overcome.

A consortium of five schools works in partnership with a Job Pathways Program, two group training companies, the regional TAFE and its local outreach centre. The region has suffered from the decline of a resource-based industry. There is an extremely high unemployment level, particularly among 15-19 year-olds, but also difficulty in filling jobs, which suggests a lack of 'job readiness' among the young people. It is hoped that the VET-in-schools program will add to the capacity of the region by providing a pool of 'job ready' workers:

Group Training Company: I don't know whether the kids in general think that there's not much happening out there, so they don't look too hard, or they just have in mind to leave the area because there's nothing offering. So when we have got a job going particularly in the rural side of things where the work might be a little bit more demanding we could advertise for months on end and perhaps get no one that's suitable....I'm hoping that school-based new apprenticeships will actually give us the opportunity to get some of these kids,...and give them a go in some of these workplaces so that they can become full-time employees...

Program offerings have not yet been matched to community employment needs:

VET-in-schools coordinator: The cluster has tended to adopt a smorgasbord type of approach ...and then we run with the ones where the numbers are viable....areas such as Retail Studies, we only have two students,...and yet the statistics tell us that it's an area that we should be really developing. But it's a case of we haven't been able to sell it successfully to kids yet.

Despite this, the skills acquired have led to employment outcomes, and to capacity building through further study:

VET-in-schools coordinator: The data that we have been able to collect suggests that we're having a very high success rate....[but] there might be kids who went on, perhaps to further study at the end of doing a VET course, who subsequently have dropped out of education and may not be employed...

There have been barriers to overcome, particularly distance:

VET-in-schools coordinator: We have been working on a range of delivery techniques here because of the distance factors so that we deliver some of our programs by video-conferencing. We also are experimenting with taking the tutor to the students in some instances, and that's supplemented by some special CD materials and also Internet material...The reality is that we can't get students who want to do Hospitality Studies from [Town A] readily into the one TAFE College at [Town B].

Government policies that have reduced government infrastructure and encouraged competition rather than collaborative approaches have made it more difficult to find work placements, made it more difficult for VET to build capacity, and for that capacity to be translated into outcomes:

Trainer: This town...never really recovered from the gutting of the government infrastructure...We had a shire complete with all its staff, engineers, town planners, accountants, health inspectors, building surveyors and

the thing is that's been replaced by Business Centre with somebody answering the phone...the shire used to take work experience students, it provided chances for school leavers...

VET-in-schools coordinator: We tend to ignore government policies which we see as inhibiting our program, and just go round them...The education system at the moment is competitive and [Town C] school will do everything to try and reduce the number of students travelling into [Town B]...To keep all the players working together for the common cause and with a common agenda, that's a constant thing we have to work at.

This vignette has evidence of capacity building in difficult circumstances (skill acquisition and job readiness). Cooperation amongst a number of players in the region has overcome some of the provision barriers created by distance, external economic factors and the effect of government policy on the towns in the region, but further cooperation could improve outcomes.

CONCLUSION

VET is responsible for tangible employment-related and community activity outcomes. The way in which VET contributes to outcomes in communities is by building capacities. Some of these capacities build new knowledge and skills directly. More importantly, VET builds self-efficacy and networks which facilitate a challenging of values and attitudes (Kilpatrick, Bell, & Falk 1999, Cranton 1994). Learning is only translated into new behaviours after values and attitudes change. Taking control and managing change requires communities to be proactive in adopting new behaviours. VET's capacity building through increasing self-efficacy and building networks is its major contribution to the success with which regional communities manage change.

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