WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH VET IN SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS?

Carmel Spark
Vocational Education & Assessment Centre, TAFE NSW

ABSTRACT

DETYA funded the Vocational Education and Assessment Centre to conduct research investigating the integration of vocational education and training (VET) and general education within a number of senior secondary schools throughout Australia. Significantly, the project employed **process benchmarking** as its primary methodology and this approach is discussed in detail in the paper.

Introduction

The Vocational Education and Assessment Centre was contracted to carry out the above research for DETYA's School to Work Section. A unique feature of the VET in Senior Schools research was the process benchmarking focus of the methodology. Benchmarking involves processes where organisations compare and contrast their practices and programs with similar organisations in order to identify good practice, with the goal of continuous improvement.

In the VET in Senior Secondary Schools Project, this took the form of progressive visits to each participating school to examine their system by collecting data for verification and comparison from teachers, students, workplace employers/supervisors and industry representatives. This involved the researcher and one teacher from the previously researched school visiting the next school on the list.

Teachers became co-researchers and were able to compare their own VET programs with those from the visiting teacher as well as against the school/college they visited. The process benchmarking methodology initiated and promoted ongoing developmental dialogue between leading edge practitioners within VET in schools. It is also a methodology which proved capable of promoting collaborative, action learning frameworks for conducting research (with the broader benefit of enhancing the profile and research skill base of those VET practitioners involved in the process).

A case study approach was adopted because of its ability to provide detailed insight into a range of issues involved in providing vocational education and training in senior secondary schools and colleges.

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (surveys, focus groups and structured interviews), using a theory-building model, were employed in conducting the case studies.

One hundred and seventy seven student surveys were completed and thirty nine VET teachers were surveyed. Approximately 6 vocational teachers at each school were also interviewed. A number of workplace supervisors were interviewed at each site and fifteen supervisor surveys were also completed at three sites. As all surveys were delivered, completed and returned during school visits, the response rate was 100%. Surveys were designed, coded, entered and data analysed using the survey design and analysis package Pinpoint.

The schools involved in the case study research are listed below:

School name	Type & Size	Is school RTO?	Has a VET Coordinator?	VET embedded?	Traineeship offered?

Erindale College, Wanniassa, ACT	Senior College 910 students	Yes	Yes Part time	Yes	No
James Harrison College, Geelong, Victoria	Years 7-12 370 students	Yes	Yes 3 hrs per week	Yes	Yes
Claremont Senior Secondary College, Hobart, Tasmania	Senior College 950 students	Yes	Yes Full Time	No	Yes
Paralowie R-12 School Adelaide, SA	Years R-12 1,230 students	No	Yes 3-4 hrs p.w.	Yes	No
Cluster of Kwinana, Rockingham & Safety Bay Senior High Schools	Years 7-12 Kwinana 970 Rockingham 1060 Safety Bay 1124	No	Yes Full time for cluster	No	Yes
Centralian College Alice Springs, NT	Senior College 202 in VET	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
St Edmund's & St Mary's Colleges, Ipswich, Qld	Years 7-12 1,300 combined	No	Yes Full Time over both Colleges	No	Yes
Bradfield College Crows Nest, NSW	Senior College 640 students	Yes	Yes Full time	Not yet but coming soon	Yes

The research was conducted throughout 1998.

Process Benchmarking Approach

Process benchmarking is a relatively untried action learning approach when placed alongside case study research, as it was in this project. How this was done, together with feedback on the process from practitioners, is outlined below. Teachers involved in process benchmarking say they learned a great deal which has benefited and improved their own practice and the VET programs in their schools. Their learning is also included.

1 STRUCTURE

Pre-visit

Each of the eight case studies involved in the project (one case study in each state/territory) was asked to designate a key contact person who was closely involved in the school-to-work program. This person had the primary involvement in the benchmarking activity and functioned as a "co-researcher" to the VEAC researcher.

All teachers were provided with detailed information about the project, the structure of the visit and their role as both host teacher and co-researcher. Information on being a co-researcher included the following guidelines:

> Part of every teacher's work involves research. In a process such as this, it is helpful to document the particular skills we will use. Generally, the type of skills required for anyone conducting research are:
>
> a genuine interest in the research area
> empathy and sincerity, to make respondents feel at ease
> listening skills - not doing too much of the talking
> questioning skills to encourage respondents to talk freely
> maintaining confidentiality
> keeping to the interview questions, to enable comparison of data
> impartiality / an ability to keep one's own bias aside. It is not the researcher's role to make judgments about the values and beliefs of respondents
> accurate note taking
> awareness of current issues within the research topic
> adherence to research Code of Ethics (attached)."

School visits

Each school was visited by two people: the VEAC researcher, Ms Carmel Spark, and the co-researcher from the previously researched school. Visits lasted approximately three days. An introductory presentation by the host school initiated proceedings. An overview of existing activities and systems regarding provision of the VET program at the school were presented The visiting co-researcher then presented a brief overview of their school's particular VET program.

The host teacher organised interviews, focus groups and survey distribution with employers and workplace supervisors, VET teachers, non VET teachers, students, external training providers and parents.

On the last day of the visit, a meeting occurred between the visiting researchers, the designated teacher and school managers. It covered observations by the host school of the research process, feedback from the researcher and co-researcher on the school's program and comparisons with other programs. This final meeting ensured the site report would not arrive at the school with any 'surprises'.

Teachers were asked to keep a written record of their reflections after visiting another school as well as any new ideas or changes they may have made to their programs as a consequence of being involved in the benchmarking process.

Post visit

A draft of the research findings for each school was sent to the School Principal and relevant staff for comments and corrections. Schools then received all eight edited site reports.

The final part of process benchmarking occurred when all eight teachers met together in Sydney for a full day to discuss and reflect on issues in VET, what they had learnt from being involved and any changes they had implemented or were planning to implement as a result of the research project. These conversations were taped and are reported on below.

2   TEACHER FEEDBACK ON PROCESS BENCHMARKING

Teachers were unanimously enthusiastic about the use of process benchmarking as an action research method for field practitioners. They made the following comments about what they liked about process benchmarking.

> Going into the other schools was fantastic because we're teachers ourselves. To walk into another school you immediately had a rapport with all the other teachers, and it didn't take very long to understand the problems they were facing, even though you were from a different state and system. I found that really good. Beyond the research question.

> Who normally asks teachers and students about these things? This part came across strongly in this project.

> The research has helped us with planning and other decisions we have to make. Don't ever have time in a school to do research properly.

> In future, we could use each other as consultants. If I've got a particular program I wish to initiate and I know another school is doing it, we could use each other in that way. *(many agreed)*

> One of the most important things from the project was gaining the network. Being able to contact other teachers has been very valuable.

> I work statewide in Tasmania with a team of 13 other VET Coordinators. I was able to go back and report on what I'd seen and share that information with them. As some of them are new, this was useful. I was also able to share with my college coordinators who had no understanding of the different ways VET is being delivered around Australia.

> I like the case study idea of research, the personalisation rather than statistics.

> I don't know if I could be working in this area if it hadn't been for the project to give me the impetus to keep going and with realising that so many things are happening in the country and it is an exciting area to be working in, and we are all still breaking new ground as we go.

One teacher described what it was like visiting another school:

> All the time I was reflecting on my own program, my school and it immediately highlighted the differences, strengths and weaknesses, for me. That was going on in my head the whole time.

All teachers agreed that receiving 'warts and all' feedback about their programs via the site report was very useful:

> Having read your own site report, particularly the shortcomings, it was good to see a visitor was able to draw those out. Teachers are not going to tell me. If that was the only thing that came out of it, that you had another view of your own program, it would be worthwhile.

> The real value of the research project for us is that we've been going through a process of introspection anyway. I've taken the report on us and analysed some of the issues. It's been incredible from that point of view. At first I had a down because of the 'negativity' that came through. But I stepped back and looked at it differently.

> Getting the site reports has been fantastic. And the fact that it's a different context for every school, everyone's problems are different - there are pieces from each place I found really relevant to us. There is a lot of information in the reports and I want to read them in more detail. This whole project to me is going to be so beneficial in planning for the future.

Teachers valued having a day together towards the end of the project to reflect on the process and what they had learnt:

> What's been valuable about today is that this is an excellent sized group. Having a three day school visit and then being able to synthesise it like this is wonderful. I'll get far more out of these than I'll ever get out of a national conference.

> This feedback day was good because it forced me to have a look at the reports and to think about them. In the job's we're doing, we have a pile that high to read. As things come up now I'll think 'oh yes, I have something on that' and I'll go back and refer to it. It triggers thinking/matching ideas. Made me reflect, made me make use of it.

> It's really motivating being with all these other keen people. Takes you out of your own little box."

Improvements which could be made to the process

While an hour and a half was set aside for the visiting teacher to present their school's VET program, rarely was that much time available. And because the host teacher was so busy organising for the visit, they were not ready to take on board information about another school's program.

> Yes, I was always worried the next interviewee wasn't going to turn up.

Teachers said they would have benefited from having all teachers meeting both at the beginning and at the end:

> You could set up some of the areas you want to have a look at, to give it focus and get a feel for the other schools' programs.

The teacher from the school first visited was disadvantaged by the lack of preparation time (it occurred during the second week of the school year) and by the process being 'tested out' in her school.

The teacher from the last school visited said:

> Being last was an advantage, as our staff really wanted to know what the visiting researchers thought of us. A real live researcher, and someone who had never been there before, told us what they saw, gave us some feedback. Teachers loved it, turned up in huge numbers. We have so many visits about our programs and we never hear anything back. So much has been written about us but we've never read it, never been sent a copy.

Generally, though, all teachers thought the research approach did not really need changing:

> Can't really improve the bit of the teacher visiting you. I think it was a good process - you can't improve the process. You need the pressure on you.

3   REFLECTION ON TEACHERS' LEARNING

At the final meeting teachers reflected on the learning they had experienced from being involved in process benchmarking. Site research reports on each school had been circulated to all teachers before the meeting. Information from these discussions provides valuable insight into the learning that occurred and the subsequent changes to VET practice teachers have made.

Learning involved:

> students had complained that they were required to learn the same type of skills in different vocational areas. "We now put these together in one package called "Information Processing for the Workplace". Once they have done it, they can credit transfer to Hospitality, Business and Tourism."

> One teacher is planning changes to their approach to student counselling, based on what they had learned from the school they visited.

> Another teacher valued learning about one school's student support program:

> I liked the mentoring program at James Harrison. 600 of our students do VET courses so it's easy for them to get lost. Good to follow students through and would like our College to address this in the near future.

> Teachers who had been interested in part time traineeships learnt "how to go about it, as well as the pitfalls" during visits to other schools:

> There are so many issues to get the traineeship up and going that we've decided we will proceed very slowly as we'll only get one opportunity. So it was excellent that I found out about related aspects.

> In one school cluster where the Hospitality traineeship had difficulty finding placements they are now looking at employers with students as part time staff and asking if they would be prepared to take them on as trainees and have the students trained by the school.

> After reading responses from teachers in her school in the site report, one teacher realised that VET teachers needed a lot more support from the school:

> VET has been imposed, our teachers have not been guided correctly or given enough support. They haven't been given the breathing time. They were secondary teachers who were told "this is now your job, this is what you will do.

> After visiting schools where VET was delivered in discrete courses, one teacher said:

> Our state has a long history of being opposed to streaming. But it has made me stop and think about why we were doing that, about the advantages and disadvantages of streaming. There is more flexibility in timetabling when you stream re teacher expertise and teams of students in each area. This is so very different to what is happening in my state.

> One teacher thought providing training for workplace supervisors (as in Tasmania) was a good idea and will follow this up.

> One school learnt they needed to improve their log books and will do some more research in that area.

> Teachers learned the importance of developing more partnerships in their local areas:

> I'm impressed with WA community/industry support in Excellence in Education Compact and will work towards this but don't think will ever be as good as in WA as there's a lack of industry around us.

> One teacher learned he needs to develop closer links between the school and workplaces:

> I was leaving this to the regional centre but as of next year I will employ a coordinator with a workplace focus from year 6 to year 12. I can do this because VET curriculum is now mainstreamed and written into job specifications for people.

> One teacher liked the industry advisory groups which Centralian College has and now has two of those operating:

> We are going to use those to coordinate all of our work placements and look at content, industry support and stipulation of what competencies can be delivered on job. Really beneficial.

As can be seen from the above comments, process benchmarking actively contributed to the ongoing improvement of VET practice within the participating schools. Strong and enduring connections between participating schools and skills in reflective analysis has assisted participating teachers to solve VET problems and introduce new ideas into their own VET programs. Further, the approach was of considerable value in terms of encouraging VET practitioners to embrace research as an integral part of their practice. VEAC firmly believes that this promotion and support of "practitioner grounded" VET-based research is an important part of its role.

Summary

Process benchmarking was adopted for this research because we were investigating the 'how' of schools delivering VET. It is a useful method whenever researchers are evaluating VET provision and identifying 'good practice'. Process benchmarking will not only identify good practice, it will encourage it by the quality process of 'continuous improvement'.

ISSUES

The method does cost more if practitioners are going to be fully reimbursed for the time taken to visit another provider, reflect on processes and practice and make changes in their own organisation. Some practitioners may be willing to become part of such a process for the benefits to their organisation, without financial reimbursement.

Conducting pre and post meetings with all practitioners was seen as being very useful by all involved, however with a national project it would be costly to bring people together.

Confidentiality may be a problem with some profit making organisations. They may not want somebody from another organisation copying their 'market edge' processes. However organisations with such an attitude would probably not agree to being involved in VET research in the first place.

BENEFITS

For practitioners:

➢ structural opportunity to reflect on their practice within a dynamic area of current VET policy
➢ improvements for both their organisations and their own professional development
➢ learnt more about research methods and the value of collaborative research in improving practice
➢ got to visit another school interstate and spend three days assessing their delivery against the schools
➢ met seven other teachers from around Australia who are also delivering VET
➢ read full site reports from seven other schools on the issues and strengths of their VET provision.

For the researcher:

➢ 'credibility' because was with a teaching professional when entering each school
➢ assistance with data gathering
➢ teacher contributed to data analysis and to evaluation of VET provision compared to their own school
➢ all teachers coming together for final day validated the research findings regarding good practice and models of delivery
➢ opportunity to explore the boundaries and possibilities of a relatively new research approach.

This paper only looked at one aspect of the VET in Senior Secondary Schools project. The many other issues are contained in the report which will be published in early 1999 by VEAC. The executive summary and individual case study findings are located on the project's web site: http://veac.org.au/vetinschools.

REFERENCES

Montague, A and Evans, P 1996, *Benchmarking by Teachers: Report of a study trialing Process Benchmarking in VET*. ANTA, Queensland.

Carmel Spark can be contacted at VEAC on telephone 02 9448 4557, or email at carmel.spark@tafensw.edu.au.