# Can Learning Communities be a Part of Future VET?

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## Introduction

This project, part of the RCVET's 2001 research program as an ANTA National Key Research Centre, arose from a number of related issues.

Firstly, there was the issue of the changing policy climate in which VET operates and ANTA's interest in developing a 'training and learning culture' in Australia. One of the ways in which ANTA was interested in pursuing this involved explorations of the notion of 'learning communities'. In this context, the research was seen as augmenting understanding of how VET was already contributing to a community-based culture and process of learning, and also of the ways in which VET could advance the development of such a culture.

As well, the research has roots in a previous program of RCVET research that examined the increasingly vocational face of Adult and Community Education (ACE). That research was grounded in an understanding of the importance of the ways in which many components of ACE provision, including vocational programs, were grounded in a broader community context. This current RCVET research aims to extend that understanding to the provision of vocational education and training (VET).

Finally, and most immediately, the research was stimulated by a related research program (McIntyre 2000) that focussed on equity issues. This had begun to uncover the complex nature of 'disadvantage' within urban communities. This research used socio-economic indexes (SEIFA indexes) to identify areas of socio-economic disadvantage, with the aim of monitoring the extent to which disadvantaged populations were reflected in participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs. A focus on urban communities was recognised as being of importance to the study of 'learning communities' for the reason that most other work on these communities had been in rural, regional or remote areas.

Through analysis of urban regional providers, this project aimed to develop a better understanding of the extent to which urban communities that include significant populations of disadvantaged citizens are adopting community-based strategies built around learning. In addition, the study aimed to identify how VET organisations are contributing to these strategies and how VET policy can develop more robust equity strategies that take greater account of local and regional difference.

## Contextual Issues

There are a number of issues providing context for this study including linkages between community development; lifelong learning and economic development; an increasing interest in the

ownership of knowledge and skills (such as in organisational learning); and a blurring of the notion of vocational education and training as a distinct sector.

## Linkages between Community Development and Lifelong Learning and Economic Development

In the context of government policy in Australia, and in particular VET policy, a number of other criteria present themselves. These criteria reflect the preferred social, economic and environmental directions of government. In other words, government policies identify, at least in broad terms, the purposes of a learning community as it might contribute to the formulation and implementation of policy. This inevitably impacts on the form a learning community might take and who some of the partners might be (Kimberley 2001b). While lifelong learning has a relatively long history, there are now some important differences in the ways the term is used. Although earlier models of lifelong learning were driven more by cultural and personal development objectives, current advocacy for lifelong learning is driven more by economic and technological imperatives (Morris 2001). As Morris points out there is a big gap between the acceptance of the concept and its practical application. Although there is Government endorsement of lifelong learning, little of a practical nature seems to be occurring. Morris refers to earlier research (Kearns et al 1999) reporting that none of the cities studied had yet instituted comprehensive policies, let alone strategies, to advance lifelong learning in the city for all citizens.

This research, however, has found indications of change in this respect as evidenced by the Case Studies, and the Learning Towns and Learning Communities Projects. Additionally, the proposed but (at the point of writing) unconfirmed, $12million in Federal funds targeted at social, economic and environmental development has people in Salisbury, South Australia, asking 'how can this be linked to the learning communities project?' (Shore 2001).

## VET's Diminishing Role as a Discrete Sector

Brown (2001) suggests there is a need to understand that there is an overlap rather than a divide among the various focuses of learning. As work and technology change, as employers demand new skills, as social, economic and environmental challenges increase, communities and society generally require new methods to facilitate learning. In parallel to this, organisations and sites of learning that would not traditionally have been identified as VET have been included and recognised as the training market has expanded. This includes ACE organisations that now offer mixed programs with around half being accredited courses. Kimberley (2001b) concluded that

> …..*vocational education and training appears to be coming a means of organising knowledge and skill rather than a particular middle level structure of institutionalised learning serving only industry needs. These new conceptions of VET and the broadening of definitions of what constitutes VET providers are demonstrated by the case studies conducted for this project.*

One of the hallmarks of vocational education and training has been its strong culture of being grounded in the 'real world' of practice With the expansion of other forms of provision such as ACE and VET in Schools programs, this is no longer a unique defining feature.

**Joint Ownership of Knowledge and Skill**

Malley (2001) suggests that there are currently some interesting questions about whether Australian VET should be considered as an exclusive stand alone sector with its own set of public and private institutions, or as a body of applied knowledge and skill that provides a basis of flexibility and renewal for a range of education, training and employment based organizations. He argues that there is evidence of a shift in thinking about vocational education and training. It is beginning to be understood not so much as a structural sector of education and training, but rather as a form of knowledge and learning that is used by different types of education and training providers to meet the needs of a variety of learners. Brown (2001) suggests that the building of a learning community requires a range of partnerships, involving groups and organisations beyond both VET and the broader education sector, as formally defined. An active learning community must also involve families, local industry, community groups (religious and cultural), government agencies (federal, state & local), public information and cultural centres (libraries, museums, galleries) and the local media.

## The Research in Brief

The aims of the research are to pursue a finer-grained analysis of the work of VET providers in their urban regional context, to contribute to improved understanding of the role of VET providers in building 'learning communities'. The research also aims to identify how VET policy can develop more robust equity strategies that take greater account of local and regional differences. To address these issues the project was conducted in three phases:

Firstly a critical review of the literature on the concept of 'learning communities' (and the related term 'learning cities') was undertaken from the perspective of socio-economic disadvantage and the role of different kinds of VET providers (i.e. public, private and community providers) (Morris 2001).

Secondly, case studies of learning communities were conducted in areas of greatest urban disadvantage identified against SEIFA criteria in four states:

- Loganlea, Queensland (Cuskelly 2001) is an isolated city SW of Brisbane characterised by high rates of unemployment, homelessness and crime. Historically it has had a low sense of community

- Salisbury, South Australia (Shore 2001) on the outskirts of Adelaide, is a community with high unemployment and lack of social cohesion

- Dandenong, Victoria (Kimberley 2001a) 32 kms SE of Melbourne is a large municipality which is richly multicultural but largely populated by lower socio-economic groupings, and

- Campbelltown, NSW (Vaughan 2001) 50 kms SW of Sydney located on Tharawal traditional aboriginal lands. The city now covers 312 square kms and includes 32 suburbs. It is a diverse area with 50% of the population being under 24 years old, and it is home to a significant Koori community.

Information for the case studies was gathered by four independent researchers using the definition of a learning community developed by Kearns, McDonald, Candy, Knights and Papadopoulas (1999) and adopted by ANTA (2000 p8):

*Any group of people, whether linked by geography or by some other shared interest, that addresses the learning needs of its members through pro active partnerships: it explicitly uses learning as a way of promoting social cohesion, regeneration and economic development.*

The additional criteria for identifying a learning community for this study were that there be an active partnership with mutual interdependency; that there be active participation of all participants; and that learning be the focus. It also should be acting to satisfy a specific need, be drawing on available community resources, and be working towards the development of an active learning community. In line with the research focus, there were two major provisos in the selection of the communities. The first was that one of the partners must be a VET provider (e.g. a school offering a VET program, a TAFE Institute, an ACE provider or another RTO) and the second that the learning community was formed in response to disadvantage in the urban community.

Finally a Research Forum on the role of VET in building learning communities was conducted which included a summary case study presentation (Hawke 2001) and papers from VET professionals and researchers (Brown 2001, Kilpatrick 2001a, Malley 2001). The focus of these papers was the role of VET in learning communities in areas of urban disadvantage. Each researcher discussed the point of focus in the context of their own working experience. Each of the presenters delivered a paper and later engaged in critical discussion of the implications of the research for policy and practice.

## General Finding

### The Concept of 'Learning Community'

From the literature Review and the case studies it was found that the 'learning community' as both a term and a concept is neither readily used nor recognised in the general community. However, in broad terms at least, government policies identify the purpose of a learning community as it might contribute to the implementation of policy. This inevitably impacts on the form a learning community might take and who some of the partners might be (Kimberley 2001b). Malley in his forum presentation (2001) points out that from a government perspective,

*There needs to be some form of agreed common purpose and action to call something a learning community. This form of agreement should take place on the basis of some formality where participants/stakeholders/recipients meet and have a voice in shaping the common purpose...a learning community is then an outcome from a deliberate set of intentions and activities that at least involves members of the target group.*

Learning communities first and foremost rely on building social capital to facilitate change. Social capital is built on respect for diversity and the development of common values and shared vision.

### The Concept of 'Vocational Education and Training (VET)'

The use of the term 'vocational education and training' or 'vet' or 'VET' has become confused in the community. There is a need to be clear about whether the focus is on 'vet' (the broad picture) or the role of 'VET' (the system)? Adult and community education is subject to similar confusion. Is it 'ace' (lifelong learning in general) or 'ACE' (programs conducted by ACE providers) that is being discussed? In terms of VET provision within a community, the confusion is compounded as many ACE providers also offer vocational education and training both as 'vet' (non-formal) and as 'VET'

(accredited courses) with some ACE providers being Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). Consequently VET, as it relates to learning communities, is problematic because the idea of learning being clearly delineated as either vocational or non-vocational is difficult to sustain (Brown 2001). This research found there is a common tendency in practice to use the large 'VET' to mean TAFE institutes and major private training providers and to use small 'vet' to refer everyone else (Kimberley 2001 b). Vocational education and training appears to becoming a means of organising knowledge and skill rather than a middle level structure of institutionalised learning and program delivery primarily serving industry needs.

Although its use is increasingly problematic, the term 'VET' throughout this project is used to include all forms of vocational education and training.

**Structural Differences between States**

A national understanding of the role of 'VET' is difficult to determine as the role of 'VET' in relation to Government policy, strategies and initiatives to implement them is played out very differently in different states. For example Victoria has the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENS) project which is seen as part of an emerging whole government approach of developing a unified post-school education and training system to ensure that it is aligned with issues of regional economic and social development. By way of contrast New South Wales for example has no such policy. There are also other differences including the role of local government and agencies in promoting learning communities.

'**Partnerships' are very Diverse**

The way people view partnerships is diverse, and the subsequent expectations of partnership linkages and their outcomes vary widely. Questions arise as to whether it is either appropriate or feasible to have a 'one-size-fits-all' view of partnerships. As it has been shown, successful development of learning communities occurs when programs and any partnerships involved are tailored to local communities and their specific needs. In the Dandenong Region four models of partnership were identified (Kimberley 2001a).

## VET's Place in Learning Communities

There are many messages that can be drawn from the volume of data. However, there are a few important points that have important implications for the future directions of policy and practice. They are as follows

**Proactive/Reactive Role**

In urban areas (and there are indications this applies to other areas as well), VET organisations are not playing pro-active roles in creating or developing learning communities. Although VET organisations are involved, typically their participation is within a generally reactive framework whereby they respond to proposals initiated by others. For example in Salisbury, TAFE Institutes had in the past developed agreements with neighbourhood houses and universities with a view to facilitating articulation of students between sectors. In recent years these agreements have become a memory while TAFE negotiates other agreements that are grounded in the competitive market and on a cost recovery basis. These agreements appear to be *ad hoc* and dependent largely on the motivation of individual coordinators (Shore 2001).

### "**Vocational' Focus a Barrier**

Discussion in the research forum revealed that any focus of VET on solely 'vocational outcomes' inhibits VET's capacity to contribute to broad learning outcomes that are often the expressed need of disadvantaged communities. In Salisbury (Shore 2001) the barrier extends to include any formal education, i.e.'*…formal education programs will continue to have difficulty attracting many of the residents…and informal settings are in equal trouble if they choose to say they are offering "learning"'*. Likewise in Loganlea (Cuskelly 2001) the community attitude toward the concept of learning was negative with a strong fear within individuals of failing in any form of education that might be identified, no matter how loosely, as 'formal'.

### **Tensions between centralised frameworks (the state, national systems etc) and the Local Community**

There is significant tension between the centralised policy frameworks within which VET has come to operate and the focus on regional economic development and community building that is more often the focal point of learning communities. In Loganlea (Cuskelly 2001) there has been '*a chasm between the community and the government and their understanding of each other)***.** Despite the thrust of recent government policy in many states toward regional development and community building, what a centralised agency thinks a community needs is often dramatically different from what a community thinks it needs.

### **Developing Trust is a Long-term Project**

Any meaningful involvement in a community requires mutual trust. While the building of trust develops in the long-term, it has been damaged or at least jeopardised by the high level of uncertainty, change and instability experienced by many VET organisations in recent years.

### **Tensions between Commercial and Community Imperatives**

There is a significant tension between the commercial imperatives required of VET providers and the need for community involvement that provides no return that is measurable in the short-term. Competitive tendering for training has seen low price bids from large outside providers winning training tenders.  Such training often fails to take into account special local needs (Kilpatrick 2001a). Other tensions arise between requirements for 'information sharing' for the benefit of the community and 'keeping information confidential' for maintaining a competitive commercial edge.

## The Future

This changing environment presents some major challenges particularly for the understanding and management of change by government and VET policy makers and providers (Kimberley 2000b). Such challenges may be met by adopting one or more of the following options. These options, however, are not mutually exclusive.

### **Option 1: 'VET' Focussed on Community Needs rather than Centrally–determined Priorities**

If this option were adopted then VET policy makers and institutions would need to learn about community development and capacity building. The linking of learning to regional economic, environmental and social development will demand a new organisational paradigm for education and training, one that is embedded more within the community, rather than in central policy agencies. In this option VET becomes actively involved in structures and processes not just content. Building learning communities is part of the ecology of building social capital which is a long, slow

process requiring a reconception of program funding and accountability. VET is just one element of this.

**Option 2: VET as a Specialised Provider involved in Broad-based Community Programs**

Within the VET system there is a need in this option for recognition that vocational learning is broader than skills training specific to the needs of particular industries, and that it includes fundamental capacities of literacy, numeracy, socialisation, communications, flexibility and learning transfer acquired from a range of formal and informal locations.

**Option 3: VET as an Institution meeting National Strategic Goals**

If this option were adopted then there would be a need for VET to re-conceive its focus. This should include not only preparation for transition to further education or work through curriculum, qualification, attendance and organisational reforms, but also the development of structures and processes to support the creation of a life long learning capacity for individuals, institutions and systems.

Successful adoption of one or more of these options would place demands on VET, in particular VET institutions, to develop new skills and competencies in relation to regional planning, investigation and reporting for learning and outcomes within an emerging social accounting framework. Other strategies fundamental to VET participation in the development of learning communities revolve around questions of how to deal with factors such as collaboration, inclusion/ exclusion, leadership, connectedness/networks, continuity and resources both human and financial. But most fundamental to developing effective learning communities is the building of mutual trust.

For VET policy to meet these challenges, and for VET providers in their many manifestations to be active partners in their local communities and committed to serving local learning needs, then as Kimberley (2001b) suggests, policy makers and providers need to be able to articulate clearly:

- different ways of conceptualising VET

- their willingness and capacity to put things into the community with no immediate / measurable return and the contingent question of how the learning of a community can be measured

- what VET has to offer a community of learners that includes many who will never step into a formal institution

- what VET can contribute to a learning community, and

- how VET can meet the postmodern challenge to satisfy the paradox of simultaneously working from the bottom up (learning community enterprise) and the top down (policy imperatives)

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