Building researcher capacity among VET practitioners: NCVER's Community of Practice scholarship

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Abstract

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) Community of Practice scholarship program for vocational education and training (VET) professionals aims to encourage a culture of research in VET organisations by providing novice researchers the opportunity to do a 12-month work-based research project. The Community of Practice program introduces participants and their employer organisations to the value of using data and research to make evidence-based decisions and solve real work problems. The program is one component of NCVER's Building Researcher Capacity initiative, and aims to build the researcher capacity of VET professionals. Since the Community of Practice program began in 2008, nearly 50 novice VET researchers have participated.

This paper will examine whether the scholarship program has achieved its aims of building researcher capacity for the participants, the employer organisations and the sector in general. The paper will present the perspectives from past and current, drawn from a modest number of interviews.

Introduction

This paper provides an initial assessment of whether the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (NCVER) Community of Practice scholarship program has been successful in building the skills and research capacity of the participants, and their employer organisations. The paper presents the perspectives of current and former Community of Practice participants on the impact participating in the program has had on developing their skills and confidence to undertake research, both in their workplace or as a potential career. The former participants also provide their views on their employer organisations, and how they value and use research.

The paper finds that for most of the participants, the Community of Practice program has been a great professional development opportunity which has built their skills and research capacity to some extent, by providing them with the opportunity to acquire research and writing skills and apply them to their workplace. The program also provides them with the opportunity to build their own community of novice researchers, and network with experienced researchers. Whether the Community of Practice program has had an impact on the employer organisations, is dependent upon the extent to which these organisations value research, support the participants and engage with their research projects. It is anticipated a review of the Community of Practice program will be undertaken, which will build on the findings from this paper, and aim to shed more light on the impact of the program on building the research capacity of the VET sector more widely.

Why does NCVER want to build researcher capacity?

In 2006, a review (DEST 2006) of NCVER's research services found the number of research proposals received by NCVER from VET practitioners in VET institutions was low. Research commissioned by NCVER was generally awarded to university researchers, many of whom were funded repeatedly. The review recommended that NCVER introduce opportunities and programs to expand the pool of researchers in the VET sector. In response to the review, NCVER called for submissions on the topic of building researcher capacity, which led to the introduction of the Building Researcher Capacity (BRC) initiative. The BRC includes a number of programs with the aim to:

- attract experienced researchers from outside the VET sector
- encourage early-career researchers
- support VET professionals to undertake research.

NCVER's Communities of Practice program, which commenced in 2008, is one component of the BRC initiative. The concept of program originated from Suzy McKenna from the Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology. The original aim of the program was to support VET professionals to undertake research, with a focus on building the research capacity of the VET sector by introducing VET practitioners to the research process and showing them and their institutions how they can use evidence-based research to inform policy and practice in the workplace. Although not an overt aim, the program can also act as a 'foot in the door' for VET practitioners who are interested in pursuing a research career, and can potentially lead to an increase in the number of VET professionals undertaking research in the VET sector.

The Communities of Practice program gives VET practitioners the opportunity to undertake a small research project and learn skills such as developing proposals, literature searching and reviewing, collecting data and writing a paper. These novice VET researchers spend 12 months researching a workplace problem and produce a paper on their research. The novice researchers learn how to: refine their topic, develop a proposal, undertake literature searching. They also learn various research methods and how to analyse data and write up the findings in a paper. Papers are then published on VOCEDplus in a special collection for new researchers[1].

The scholarship winners are selected by a panel made up of representatives from NCVER, AVETRA, Work-based Education Research Centre (WERC) at Victoria University, Adult Learning Australia, TAFE Directors Australia, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training, and Group Training Australia. They receive a modest grant of $4000 plus additional funding from their employer organisations.

Applications for the program have remained fairly consistent although there was an unexpected spike in 2011, with over 40 applications. However, numbers have been sitting around the mid-teens the past few years (see table 1). With up to ten scholarships available each year, applicants have a good chance of being successful.

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[1]

http://www.voced.edu.au/search/apachesolr_search/?filters=sm_metadata.collection:"CommunitiesOfPractice"

Table 1   Number of applications

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
				Year			
Total	20	26	16	42	13	17	134

Our community of practice

During the course of the scholarship program participants attend two, two-day workshops, where they get the opportunity to meet each other and form the 'community'. The notion of 'community' is central to the program. The 'community' in this community of practice encompasses the participants, their employers, the mentors and the program managers at NCVER, WERC and AVETRA.

Throughout the program, the participants are supported by program managers at NCVER and WERC, experienced VET researcher mentors from the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) and their own workplaces.

The mentor scheme has proven to be a particularly important part of the program, as mentors provide valuable knowledge and guidance about the research process. While not all mentoring partnerships have been successful, most of the participants have positive experiences with their mentors and value their guidance.

Likewise, support from employer organisations is also an integral part of the program. Employers are asked to make a matching contribution, which includes funding and time release. In an attempt to increase employer support for the participant and their research project, employers are now required to identify and sign-off the level of support being offered to the participant. They also approve the initial proposal and final paper. Participants are encouraged to have a 'critical friend' in the workplace who can advise them on issues related to their workplace. NCVER has also created a newsletter targeted to employers to keep them abreast of the communities of practice.

Along with the support of the workplace, mentors, WERC and NCVER, participants also support and learn from each other. The benefits of the communities of practice model, is that people with a shared interest and a shared practice (that is, they are VET professionals and novice researchers) who can share their experiences and learn from each other (Wenger 2006).

The Community of Practice participants do this through coming together at the two workshops and NCVER's annual No Frills conference, where they present a group session. They are encouraged to communicate and share knowledge and resources though a wiki and a social networking site. In a couple of cases, participants who live in close proximity to each other have met up to share their experiences.

Since the Communities of Practice program began in 2008, 48 novice VET researchers have participated. Currently, 28 papers have been published and another ten are in progress. Ten participants have withdrawn from the program, generally for health and work-related reasons (see table 2).

Table 2   Summary of participants in the community of practice (as at 1 March 2013)

Year	No. of participants	No. completed	No. did not complete
2008	10	4 published	3 withdrew (change of job, health) 3 did not complete 1 continued in 2009 with new employer and topic
2009	10 + 1 from 2008	10 published	1 withdrew (change of job)
2010	10	6 published, 1 deferred, 1 in progress	2 withdrew (health and work related reasons)
2011	10	8 published, 2 in progress	
2012	7	Due April 2013	
Total (as at March 2013)	**48**	**38 (28 published, 10 in progress)**	**10**

Measuring building researcher capacity: our method

Measuring whether or not the communities of practice have been successful in building research capacity is a challenging task. Research capacity is not easily defined or measured and no targets were identified when the program commenced in 2008.

This paper aims to provide and initial assessment of the Community of Practice program and the extent to which it has built researcher capacity. Eight former participants (from 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011) were asked to share their views on whether or not the program succeeded in building their own skills and research capacity, and the research capacity of their institutions. To maintain confidentiality, the participants and their employer organisations are not identified in this paper.

This paper also draws on information gleaned from a previous review of the program (Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder 2010), informal feedback from participants and program managers, and data from NCVER in regards to the number of publication page views on the NCVER and VOCEDplus websites and media citations.

Have the communities of practice worked in building researcher capacity?

A review of the program undertaken in 2010 found the Community of Practice program is popular within the VET sector, and is seen as meeting an important need in helping to build researcher capacity among VET professionals, and promoting workplace-based research as valuable (Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder 2010).

The review found that the model underpinning the program was also valued. This includes the 'community of practice' aspect, the mentoring scheme and the employer support. Participants particularly valued the workshops, which gave them a chance to engage with their peers, and their mentors, who provided critical advice and guidance on the research process (Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder 2010).

Bartram, Stanwick and Loveder (2010) also identified the 'continuous improvement' philosophy of the program as another strength. The program has adapted over the years by drawing on advice from participants, program managers, and mentors to continue to inform and develop the model. This includes: altering the application form to better suit novice researcher, having two workshops each year instead of one, attempting to ensure better mentor match-ups, and attempting to ensure greater employer support for the participants and engagement in the program. Developing the program over the years appears to have paid-off, as each year, a greater percentage of participants complete the program (see table 1).

Another review of the Community of Practice program is planned. This review will build on this paper, and provide a more comprehensive analysis of whether the program has achieved its aims.

...for the individual participants

Bartram, Stanwick and Loveder (2010) found that participants have overwhelmingly reported benefits from participating in the program. This includes improving their research and writing skills, increasing their knowledge in their subject area and increasing their confidence with research. The participants also reported work-related benefits, including participants raising the profile of their work within their organisation as well as externally, and gaining promotions. The professional development aspect of the program, with a focus on research, is also noted by the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA) (2013, p.142).

In general, the participants interviewed for this paper agreed with the above sentiments. Particularly in regards to their professional development and the research skills they learnt through participating in the program and from their mentor. Many indicated that even though they may not be undertaking further formal research projects, they often use the skills they learnt in their day-to-day jobs.

A number of participants in the 2010 review also noted the confidence they gained from presenting their research to their peers and senior management and external conferences, such as No Frills and AVETRA conferences. Another outcome of the program is the opportunity for participants to network with more experienced researchers and be more connected with the broader VET research community (Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder 2010).

All of the participants interviewed for this paper had an interest in research and how it contributes to policy and practice in the workplace before they commenced the program, and most continue to be interested in research after completing their research.

For some, the opportunity to participate in the communities of practice acted as a stepping stone to pursing further research. Several participants (three the author is aware of) have since undertaken, or are undertaking a masters by research or a doctorate of philosophy. Others (2 of those interviewed) have been involved in other formal research projects, either as part of a research team, or in their role in their workplace. Several of the participants also belong to research committees in their organisations.

...for the employer organisations

Bartram, Stanwick and Loveder (2010) found that most of the participants in the early years felt that their research had an impact on their workplace's policy and practice. This seems to be the case with the participants interviewed for this paper. Most participants indicated that their research was valued by their workplace. For example, research which evaluated programs was used by organisations when they undertook reviews of the programs. Other research projects informed the development of teaching and assessment tools, practices and strategies, or contributed to the organisation planning and built organisational knowledge.

Some of the workplaces are receptive to the research and a number of the participants are encouraged to present their findings to their colleagues and senior management. Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder (2010) find the Community of Practice helped organisations to be more aware of the range of research and statistical information available on VET.

Most of the participants are practitioners who are undertaking their research project on top of their normal role. Some participants are in the position where undertaking research is part of their role. These participants tend to receive more support from their employers.

Around a third of the participants interviewed identified a key person in their organisation who valued and promoted research within the workplace. This included encouraging employees to apply for the communities of practice, acting as a critical friend to participants, actively disseminating research (both research produced from the communities of practice and other research), and driving a research-focused agenda at the senior management level.

However, this positive level of engagement and support was not the experience of all the participants. Two of the participants interviewed indicated that their organisations were not interested in their research projects or the findings and how they could inform policy and practice. Informal feedback from other participants suggests that these are not isolated cases.

These participants, while positive about their experiences with the community of practice, suggested several reasons for the lack of support and interest from their institutes:

- A lack of research culture within the organisation meant that there is little support for their projects and interest in their research, and any impact it may have on practice.
- Two participants from mixed-sector institutes suggested that while research was integral to the higher education section of their institutes, the VET section did not seem as interested.
- Budget restraints meant that even if employer organisations are interested in research, it is not necessarily a high priority.
- For some of the participants, their employer organisations supported their participation as a professional development opportunity, but were not necessarily interested in the resulting research.

Whether the community of practice program has had an impact on the employer organisations appears to depend on the extent to which these organisations value evidence-based research in the workplace and how it can contribute to policy and practice, and their position to fund such research. This also seems to have an impact on the level of support the participants received and the extent to which employer organisations engaged with their research projects.

...for the sector

As indicated above, Bartram, Stanwick and Loveder (2010) found the communities of practice program to be very popular in the VET sector. However its impact on the VET sector is difficult to measure.

The papers produced from the program, while varying in their level of quality, appear to be popular in the sector. Google Analytics data on the NCVER website shows that the average page views for each paper is 1400. The types of organisations most likely to look at the community of practice papers are TAFE institutes or colleges followed by government, private and other non-TAFE training organisation, and research organisations or universities.

NCVER has also created a special collection for new researchers on VOCEDplus. Since this collection was created in March 2012 it has had nearly 350 hits on the collections page, and over 1200 publication page views.

Some of the papers have generated modest media interest. Approximately half of the papers which have been published, either on the NCVER website or VOCEDplus, have featured in media, including various education sector newsletters and bulletins, Australian Policy Online, Sydney Morning Herald online.

Some of the participants are proactive in disseminating their research both within and outside of their organisations. Most of the participants have presented their findings to at least one conference, with one participant being invited to present her findings at five different conferences, and another being invited to submit her research to an international journal. On three occasions, participants have presented their findings to government officials to help inform government policies and strategies. Several participants have also reported sharing their research with other researchers who are studying similar topics.

In regards to Community of Practice program producing new researchers for the VET sector, it is unlikely the program will contribute to this significantly (Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder 2010). This is not surprising, given the program is not aimed specifically at budding career researchers, unlike other components of NCVER's Building Researcher Capacity initiative, but targeted to VET professionals with an interest in research who undertake small, workplace-based projects rather than academic research. Most of these novice researchers do not go on to further develop a career in VET research. Despite this, a handful of people do purse a research career, or undertake further research after participation in the program, which could be considered as an unanticipated bonus.

Conclusion

The Community of Practice program provides an opportunity for VET professionals and their employer organisations to undertake workplace-based research. Most participants had a positive experience with the program and felt they learnt valuable research skills and enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in the world of VET research as it relates to their workplace.

The impact of the program on the employer organisations varies. According to the experiences of the participants, it depends on the extent to which the organisations value research, support the participants and engage with their research projects. It is clear that some organisations engage with, and benefit from, the research much more than others.

Determining whether the program has been successful or not in building researcher capacity for the VET sector is not straightforward. While a small handful of participants use their experience in the Community of Practice program as a 'foot in the door' to pursuing a career in VET research, most participants are VET professionals with an interest in workplace-based research rather than academic research. As such, it is unlikely the program will produce many new researchers for the VET sector. That said the Community of Practice program appears to be helping to build research skills and capacity for most of the VET professionals who participate, and promoting workplace-based research as valuable to their employers.

A forthcoming review will further consider the impact of the program. In addition to building on the findings of this paper, it is anticipated the review will look at the experiences and outcomes of all 48 participants from 2008 to 2012 to see whether they continue to be involved in VET research. This includes considering the number of published papers and articles, conference/seminar/workshop participation, and applications for other grants and funding rounds. The review will consider what impact the research and research skills have had on employer organisations by including the perspectives of employers. The review will also consult program managers, mentors, and the Advisory Group. It is anticipated the review will provide a more comprehensive and thorough analysis of the degree to which the Community of Practice program has achieved its aims of building researcher capacity for participants, employer organisation and the broader VET sector.

Acknowledgements

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