

Research Today

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

The value and quality of VET research

Welcome to another packed update on VET research in Australia – world-class quality research as one of our articles asserts!

We are all aware that the reshaping of the VET system in the early 90's was matched by the emergence of a national VET research community. It is important that the current reshaping of the VET system is again matched by the development of the VET research community. We have a strong base to build from. I believe that we need to continue to secure our core institutions, build the knowledge base and ensure our activity is well aligned with the strategic shifts in the VET environment. Does this mean always following the current questions of government? Not always, as we also need to place dilemmas and issues from the field in front of policy makers. Perhaps we need a mixture of both, studies where we seek to enrich existing political agendas and studies where we confront existing agendas with evidence from the field.

I believe that we need to continue to secure our core institutions, build the knowledge base and ensure our activity is well aligned with the strategic shifts in the VET environment.

The VET research community has been a fertile development pasture for many of our current leading thinkers and more recently has become more involved with developing the next generation of VET researchers. Let us be honest that all research communities are often very competitive locally and nationally. Our recent activities have seen more senior researchers sharing their knowledge with new VET researchers through a variety of interactions. This is good for the health of the community and the essential collaboration for a sustainable future. Perhaps what will actually live on far more beyond the influence of our papers will be the seeds sown within those who take our places.

Personally, I feel very lucky that I came to the community as it was developing and have been carried forward by the wave the resulted. One of the issues for VET research development in the next years will be the continued development of new researchers in our community and how we

can store and share our research knowledge with them. This means addressing their needs more frequently. The second issue is how within the naturally competitive VET research environment we can also collaborate to promote 'us' – the capability, the quality, the contribution of our research.

On a lighter note, I have always believed that researchers have a unique and quite delicious role in being a fly on the wall and in climbing inside the thoughts of others. To me, the dilemmas of the world of VET practice have always mirrored wider dilemmas of life. The more I read, the more I find others have uncovered the same dilemmas, in different fields, and in different centuries. All practitioners have always struggled with balancing the tensions that shape our existence to find the right balance for their own situation, place, and time. While we are charged with reporting what the voices of the field say, we are also asked to link this to existing knowledge. I always find that the heart of any research study reflects a broader philosophical dilemma.

Unusually, these dilemmas and tensions have been nailed by a philosopher or two, but often they have also been expressed by artists through a variety of media. I find plays a wonderful source of analysis space where the words of actors mingle with the thoughts in my head, focusing my mind on the key message emerging from a current study and realising it reflects broader community and life struggles. The play 'Red' about Mark Rothko currently played in Perth and the torments of the artist had many parallels and messages for researchers, who similarly are both a part of and yet separate from their community. Taking pride in place of theatric experiences in my mind is 'Copenhagen' about the physicists during WWII. Sounds dull ? – but it contains so many dilemmas of researchers in another physical domain that translate well into our own current issues of searching for understanding in the social world. I would recommend both these plays, but even more connecting our work with other wider searches for understanding.

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Mixed Method Studies: the mixed messages of supposedly hard and soft data sources

When we focus on specific VET research issues we often find that a holistic investigation of the subject may benefit from an analysis of the statistics associated with the issue as well as an analysis of the perceptions and experience of the practitioners in the field. Such mixed method studies have become more popular as the silos between differing research approaches have been eroded and the advantages of using different lenses has been increasingly appreciated.

As researchers, we are supposed to approach our subjects with an open mind and without bias. However, we all know that we hold some very basic assumptions about how the world works, or should work, that are often not held by others. Indeed, we often approach specific issues because of our personal passions and interests and to see if our assumptions might improve the field of practice. In terms of mixed method research our education has probably already developed our perceptions of different types of data.

Statistics and numbers about occurrences in the field have a finite allure to them. We rely on the surety of figures to provide us with baseline data, even if we may be skeptical about detailed predications made from calculations using these figures. In contrast, we treat the words of people gathered from the field as personal expressions that change over time, depend on the moment of questioning and will vary according to their personal experiences and unique developmental patterns. In short, we tend to see numerical data as hard evidence and verbal qualitative data as soft evidence. This is not always so, in fact the reverse may be true.

Reflecting on a recent PhD study, there is good reason why researchers should retain a healthy skepticism about such assumptions. In this study the analysis provided evidence that the supposed hard data was in fact very open to question and not hard at all, while ironically it was the supposed soft data that provided clear evidence of what was really happening within the industry at that time.

This study comprised a two-phase investigation into safety compliance in the Civil Construction industry (CCI) within Western Australia. The first phase of the study collected 3882 incident reports

involving 4948 employees for the years 2001-2006 inclusive from 24 organisations within the CCI. The second phase of the study consisted of 39 interviews with CEOs, OH&S managers, supervisors and injured employees working in the CCI in WA in large to micro businesses.

The analysis of the data provided some contrary evidence from that expected by the researchers. First, the data revealed that the incident data collected in phase one was not always accurate. Often organisations assigned light duties for injured employees to avoid them taking extended leave thus reducing recorded lost time through injuries. Managers, indicated that such statistics were often mis-reported and wrongly categorised due to the inexperience of staff. There was often under recording in the belief that minimising the figures would appease managers and the organisation.

In short, the examination of 3882 incident reports, revealed that this 'hard' data may often obscure incidents that occur as organisations may be pressured into providing reportable incident figures that make them appear safer than they really are. Underpinning the hard statistics is a web of human decision-making. Manager's miss-record, fail to record, and wrongly categorise incidents, sometimes unintentionally, and sometimes to generate what they believe to be the required profile for their organisation.

In effect, the data derived from this study indicated that the hard face of the statistics obscured the reality that they are socially constructed and rely upon sometimes, erroneous human decision-making. The hard data are in effect quite soft. They are produced as a definite record of what is happening within organisations and yet they are often an incomplete account, produced by people to create a required picture of organisational reality. This study indicates that managers and researchers would be well advised not to take hard statistical data at face value and to recognise that such figures are produced by hard-pressed managers in the field sometimes carelessly and sometimes influenced misguidedly by what they believe their organisation would like to see. Torn between the potentially conflicting pressures resulting from ensuring safety compliance and progressing work,

managers manipulate data and often provide conflicting signals to their staff with hard safety instructions that are juxtaposed with far 'softer' territory of interpreting safety guidelines and managerial actions to form the safety culture of the workplace.

In contrast, the softer data collected from managers and operatives in the field appeared to have far harder implications for the organisation. Despite the rigor and mandatory nature of safety training in the industry, operatives tended to follow the examples they saw around them rather than the black and white behaviour patterns digested from training, posters and assessment tests. What managers actually did in the workplace set the tone, standards and culture for that workplace. Actions overruled words. Managers were continually wedged between safe behaviours and production behaviours, with the latter value winning out. What managers did in the workplace was far more instrumental in shaping the safety culture than what they said.

This study demonstrates how fragile or soft seemingly hard safety statistics are, and conversely, how instrumental the softer unintended acts and words of managers can be, displacing the seemingly hard rhetoric of safety guidelines and statutes. The irony of this study is in highlighting how hard statistical data is often an illusion, a fabricated story of what happens at the workplace, while the daily actions of the managers, seemingly diverse and changing continually are strongly instrumental in shaping the actions of their employees. The moral for researchers is clear. Shed all preconceptions and recognise that there are stories and softness behind every set of figures, and that similarly the diversity of perceptions in the field may actually be strongly instrumental in forming cultural patterns. Seemingly hard data can in fact be very 'soft', and seemingly soft data can in fact be very 'hard'.

Susanne Bahn and Llandis Barratt-pugh

The quality of VET research

When we think about quality of research we consider that good research should add to the body of knowledge in the discipline and/or should have a beneficial influence on local, national or international policy and practice. Is Australian VET research of high quality? From time to time statements are made in the media or in other forums that seem to imply that there may be some quality issues, but we argue strongly otherwise. Here we provide some evidence for the quality of VET research in Australia.

In general, evaluating the quality of research is quite tricky. Governments the world over have been struggling with doing this over the last decade or so, and learning from each others' research assessment exercises. These exercises generally focus on the quality and quantity of a researcher or group of researchers, and their institution. So, for example, if a group of researchers have many publications and many nationally competitive grants, then it is assumed that their work is probably of high quality. For researchers' published work, there are indicators of quality such as a journal's ranking in the now-defunct Australian journal ranking exercise, or the number of times a paper is cited, a measure more commonly adopted in the sciences. A number of other proxy measures for quality are available.

While some of these measurement schemes seem quite mechanical, in the absence of such 'metrics', judgments can be quite subjective. Sometimes people assume, for example, that quantitative research is of higher quality than qualitative research, that it is somehow 'truer' and more objective. In fact, good research selects methods that are appropriate for the question being investigated, and judgments about quality should not be made on the basis of methodological approaches alone.

Given this, what are some other indicators of the quality of research and how does Australian VET fare? The rest of this paper approaches the question from several perspectives to argue that our research makes a significant contribution both to the body of knowledge about VET and to policy and practice. Research doesn't count for anything unless it is respected and read.

Esteem within 'the academy' – establishing academic credibility

Peer-reviewed publications. Peer review occurs when reviewers who are generally also academics in the field are asked to review a paper and send comments back to the author via the journal editor, and the author then works on his or her article to improve it. Usually at least two reviewers comment on a paper. Peer review is not foolproof but it is a good way of helping to ensure that work published is worth reading, addresses a significant question, is ethical and that its conclusions follow from the method and findings and are not over-claimed. Australian VET researchers have a good output of peer-reviewed journal articles, which are regularly seen in respected overseas journals such as the Journal of Vocational Education and Training. Publishing in international journals helps to ensure that Australian researchers keep abreast of international issues and incorporate them in their thinking.

Invitations to give keynote speeches at overseas conferences. Australian VET researchers such as Stephen Billett, Terri Seddon, Roger Harris, Erica Smith and Elaine Butler have given recent keynote speeches overseas, indicating the esteem in which their work is held.

Involvement in international networks. Australian VET researchers are involved in participation in, and management of, international research networks. For example Berwyn Clayton is working with English academics in leading a research network for practitioners; Stephen Billett and Ros Brennan Kemmis are each involved in a range of international networks with European scholars; and Erica Smith is co-chair of the international apprentice research network, INAP, which spans all the continents. These research networks are not confined to discussion and conferences; they produce internationally collaborative research outputs as well, and often include policy-makers as well as researchers and practitioners.

Involvement in evaluating research. VET researchers are regularly invited by universities in Australia and overseas to assess PhDs and Master by Research theses. They are asked by governments in Australia and overseas to assess national grant applications. And they are requested to review papers for high-level journals. They would not be invited to do so if their

work was not regarded as high quality. Many VET researchers are members of editorial boards of international journals, not only within the VET field, but also in broader education and management fields.

The standing of VET journals. In the recent national ERA journal-ranking exercise (which has now been terminated) the 22 journals that were identified as VET and adult education by our community were ranked above the Australian average in terms of quality. 7 out of 22 (31.8%) of our journals were ranked A* or A in the national ERA exercise, whereas the average for disciplines was 20%. The national exercise involved a complex process of ranking by the broad discipline and then validation by panels.

VET successes in nationally competitive grants. For a small body of researchers, a comparatively large number of VET researchers have gained Australian Research Council Linkage and Discovery grants, which are commonly regarded as the 'gold standard' among grants. NCVET grants are also classed as nationally competitive, and many VET researchers have been successful in this scheme several times. VET researchers also gain considerable amounts of research funding from government and industry bodies. As research funding is awarded on the basis of past achievement, innovative ideas and proven research ability, the level of success among VET researchers indicates that their work is held in high esteem.

Standing in their universities and in the academic world. VET academics 'punch above their weight' in the proportion who are Deans, Heads of Schools, Associate Deans for Research, chairs of major university committees, and members of the professoriate. Some VET academics have large groups of students studying research higher degrees. VET academics contribute nationally to committees and working parties in the higher education sector.

Esteem in the VET sector – establishing research relevance

While academic measures of quality are very important, in VET we usually agree that it's also important that our work is valued by the VET sector as well. The sector values research that can be of practical use in the sector and in policy-making, and that challenges existing

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From previous page

viewpoints. In a report produced for AVETRA, Dymock and Billett (2009: 16) suggest that the issue of uptake in the sector is quite complex and rests on a number of factors including i) timeliness, ii) applicability, iii) accessibility, iv) credibility, v) dissemination and availability, vi) interactions, and vii) the extent to which research is valued. Not all of these factors are related to the quality of the research, but 'credibility' certainly is. VET researchers have an unusual degree of involvement in their sector compared with, for example, school-education researchers. Some of these forms of involvement, which reflect the esteem in which their work is held, are discussed below.

Involvement in policy making.

VET researchers are included in many consultations to make or change government policy – for example, recently, the Productivity Commission study of the VET workforce, the Skills Australia paper, and apprenticeship reform. Researchers are sometimes included in formal consultations and sometimes consulted individually. They also make submissions, sometimes by invitation, to government inquiries, and the value of these submissions may partly be measured by the number of times their work is cited in the reports and in the extent to which their suggestions are taken up in new or changed policies.

Involvement in improving practice.

Many of our researchers are regularly invited to present to groups of practitioners, at national, State, local and Institute levels. Invitations would not be extended unless the researcher's work was valued.

Inclusion in VET teacher development.

VET researchers' published work is used in VET teacher-education in university courses and also in Certificate IV and Diploma courses.

Esteem from the general public – establishing social credibility

One measure of impact of research (Stanwick, Hargreaves and Beddie, 2009) is the number of references in the media to a piece of research. While this is not directly a quality measure, it is an indication of the perceived importance of the research and its findings. One might assume that the higher-level the media outlet, the more likely it would be that the research has been scrutinised for quality. VET researchers regularly publish in journals such as *Campus Review* and the

Australian TAFE Teacher and their work is also picked up by mainstream newspapers such as *The Australian* and *The Age*, and radio stations.

What helps VET research in Australia to maintain its quality?

Australian VET research is fortunate to have two major and well-established bodies to assist in the maintenance of the research effort and to safeguard its quality: AVETRA and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). AVETRA, which now has a 14-year history, has high recognition both in Australia and overseas (Robson & Bailey, 2010). AVETRA has close ties with the Australian Association for Research in Education and, through AARE, the world educational research association WERA. AVETRA provides research development activities, a peer-reviewed conference, local events every October, and a code of ethics for VET researchers. The NCVER is of invaluable service to the VET research community in its funding, knowledge brokering, dissemination, and engagement activities (Smith, 2001). It maintains the international database of VET research – VOCED. NCVER also employs a number of researchers itself, has large government contracts for statistical and research services, and provides development programs for researchers. Through both AVETRA and NCVER, policy-makers, practitioners and researchers are brought together and ensure that our research meets the requirements of each stakeholder group for quality and esteem.

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Written by members of the AVETRA executive

Working Together: Integrated language, literacy and numeracy support in vocational education and training

This publication, funded by DEEWR, aimed to provide a national picture of LLN support provided on VET courses, and to suggest recommendations for improving provision. It was based on a national email scan of LLN providers, and semi-structured interviews with over 50 VET teachers and managers.

Overall, the provision of LLN support in Australian VET was found to be patchy and ad hoc, with little consistency across the states and territories. By and large LLN support falls within a deficit model in so far as most provision identifies students with LLN 'problems' (i.e. deficiencies) and then provides a remedial response in the form of special LLN classes or team teaching where the LLN teacher primarily assists those identified with the problems.

Two pedagogical models are outlined which move beyond this deficit approach. The Certificate in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) developed in WA, adopts a team teaching approach where students are not assessed for their LLN problems, and LLN practices are fully embedded in the delivery of vocational courses. In the 'shared delivery' model, LLN students are co-enrolled in a LLN and vocational course, and LLN and vocational teachers have joint responsibility for the same student groups. This provision, where two teachers have equal responsibility for the same student group (though they don't necessarily teach together), can encourage pedagogical changes.

Recommendations are provided for VET policy, pedagogy and professional development.

The report can be found at www.rilc.uts.edu.au/projects/working-together.html

Journal rankings – AVETRA members' views

The topic of journal rankings has generated a great deal of debate and opinion. However there has been little, if any, empirical research to inform decisions – including the decision a few weeks ago by Senator Carr, the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, to abolish the rankings. The findings of a survey of members of AVETRA throws into question the Minister's decision to abolish the rankings and his assertion that the lists alone were sufficient, without the rankings. The Minister supported his decision by reference to what he considered inappropriate behaviour by universities including, for example, use of journal rankings for academic promotion processes.

Our Association contains practitioners and others interested in the discipline, as well as academics. The journal rankings were designed primarily for use in the new Excellence in Research for Australia exercise and are of particular interest for academics, as the performance of universities is now judged partly by ERA results. AVETRA has been involved in the journal ranking process from its early days during the previous government's Research Quality Framework (which was never implemented). AVETRA worked with other bodies in the education field on the broad Education rankings and we also undertook our own in-depth ranking process for the small field of VET journals. This ranking process and its results was reported in an earlier edition of Research Today, and can be found on the AVETRA web site at <http://avetra.org.au/avetra-initiatives/avetra-journal-rankings>.

It will be seen that our own ranking of relevant journals varied somewhat from the national ERA ranking which was adapted from the Education discipline's rankings.

Prior to the journal ranking exercise there were few firm benchmarks to indicate the quality of journals. In some disciplines mainly in science measures such as numbers of citations were used, but these depended on journals being listed by certain publishing houses, and were mainly confined to science. In our own area of interest, views about journals' quality were informed by rumour and anecdote, or measures such as a high proportion of rejected papers were used as a proxy for quality.

In late 2010 I surveyed AVETRA members to investigate their views about journal rankings in general, and about the ERA rankings and the AVETRA rankings in

particular. I was really pleased to receive 50 responses, representing just under a quarter of the membership at that time. While 44% of respondents were academics, 26% were VET practitioners such as TAFE staff, and 30% were 'other' which included government officials, private consultants and so on. Over half of the respondents had published in some sort of outlet, and all were readers of both peer-reviewed and professional journals. All except four said they had at least some understanding of the journal ranking process, indicating that journal ranking is not only of interest in academic circles. To confirm participants' understanding, I provided a brief summary of the process.

The data provide interesting reading. 72% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with a statement that 'Rankings of journals is a good thing' with only 4 people (8%) disagreeing. Agreement rates were consistent among the groups of respondents. Qualitative comments, particularly from academics, indicated a range of critiques of the ranking system, which nevertheless, evidently, did not negate their overall support for it. I also asked about different uses of journal ranking. The use that got the most 'votes', by a small margin, was to improve the quality of articles in the journal (85.7% agreed or strongly agreed); practitioners were particularly keen on this aspect. All respondent groups agreed that informing readers and authors alike about the quality of the journal were important, with academics giving slightly more weight to information for authors.

Of those that published in peer-reviewed journals, three-quarters of the academic respondents said that the ERA rankings were likely to affect their publishing behaviour (or already had). Two-thirds of the 'other' respondents said their behaviour was likely to be affected, while the majority of the practitioners said that it would not be. Some qualitative responses indicated little behaviour change associated with journal ranking, for example 'Not really – I know which journals are worthwhile and have particular standing for particular fields'. However some responses showed more influence on behaviour. These included: 'Everyone now needs to chase A* publications, even if the best journals in the field are ranked lower'. Only one respondent specifically referred to institutional pressure: 'Being in an institution where this is important I will need to change what I do. This will

mean, for example, thinking hard about publishing in the AVETRA journal because it is not ranked as an A*'.

What do these survey results tell us about journal rankings? It seems that those in the field – both academics and practitioners – are telling us quite strongly that they think journal rankings are a good thing. They think rankings provide a useful indicator of quality for readers and authors alike, and that they are likely to improve the quality of journal articles. The overall tenor of the comments about behaviour change suggest that people do change their behaviour, but that they also weigh up the audience for their publications, with journal rankings forming only one part of the decision making. Behaviour change, of course, need not be a bad thing. The survey provided little evidence of the rankings being 'deployed inappropriately', as the Minister put it. Or at least, an inference could be drawn that while academics may have perceived pressure to publish in highly-ranked journals, they were in the end making their own decisions about what to do.

It is unfortunate that the ARC did not consult specifically on whether journal rankings should be retained. The academic community imagined it was being consulted earlier this year on the detail of the rankings, and did not get an opportunity to vote for or against retaining the rankings. The results in the VET sub-discipline indicate strong overall support for rankings, tempered by a healthy pinch of critical salt that indicates that if universities' senior managers were behaving badly, the academics may not have been paying a great deal of attention. And our survey shows that users of research – practitioners and others – certainly liked to see the rankings. It does not seem sensible to abandon a useful system, into which the rank and file has invested so much energy, because, supposedly, some managers behaved dysfunctionally – but the public has been provided with no empirical data on that issue, either.

The journal rankings have now been removed from the Australian Research Council web site, but you can search the rankings by discipline area ('ANZ field of research'), or by journal names, through the following web site devised by John Lamp, an academic at Deakin University: <http://lamp.infosys.deakin.edu.au/era/> VET sits mainly within the '13' codes.

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From previous page

For the new ERA round in 2012, there is simply a list of journals which can be found at

http://www.arc.gov.au/era/era_2012/era_journal_list.htm

A further change, of interest primarily to academics, is that under certain conditions, individual papers can now be attributed, for ERA purposes, to fields of research other than that allocated to the journal.

Note: Parts of this article appeared in The Australian on 15 June 2011.

Erica Smith, Professor of Education, University of Ballarat. Immediate Past President AVETRA

Book Launch: *Apprentices – Young People in Transition*

The health and wellbeing of young workers – and young men in particular – is an area often neglected in the youth research literature. With this in mind, researchers Dr. Tim Corney and Dr. Karin du Plessis recently launched their new book *Apprentices – Young People in Transition*, at a professional development conference of the Youth Workers' Association in Melbourne.

The book showcases evidence-based findings from research conducted over a number of years with apprentices and young workers in the building and construction industries in Victoria. A range of diverse topics are presented which address the challenges that many young working people encounter as they transition from school to work, including chapters on relational issues, bullying, substance use, gambling, financial management, help-seeking and nutrition. The book is designed as a resource for people interested in, and working with, apprentices and young workers as they journey into employment.

Apprentices – Young People in Transition is published by Incolink and the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.

It can be ordered online from the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies for \$24.95 (+ postage): www.acys.info/books/other_books/apprentices_book

Models of continuing education and training for the national tertiary education and training system

To date, Australian tertiary education and training (TET) has largely focussed on initial occupational preparation (i.e. entry-level training), and its course provisions and structures, including their objectives and organisation have come to reflect that emphasis. Yet, the continuing development of Australian workers' skills and sustaining employability across their working lives is now a major policy priority. Certainly, the need for ongoing skill development across working life as occupational and workplace requirements change, and across lengthening working lives, where workers may need to switch occupations or broaden their occupational capacities suggests a focus on entry-level training may not be best placed to meet the changing skill requirements of Australian industries, workplaces and workers. Consequently, to guide these considerations and future developments, it is timely to evaluate the efficacy of existing institutional provisions of continuing education and training (CET) to ascertain how best to sustain workers' employability across their working lives.

To this end, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) has funded a three year project to be undertaken by the Adult and Vocational Education group of researchers at Griffith University. Their role is to critically evaluate the alignment between the existing approaches to continuing education and training provisions within the Australian TET system and current and emerging workplace, workforce and worker requirements. The project is systematically appraising how these provisions might be best ordered, organised and enacted in both education and workplace settings. The appraisal is informed by identifying educational purposes, models and practices that can not only sustain workers' employability across their working lives but also engage these workers, their employers and industry in meeting emerging workforce development goals.

The research project is guided by the following question:

What models and practices of continuing TET can best meet workplace

demands and sustain Australian workers' ongoing occupational competence and employability across their working lives?

It is further informed by two sub-questions:

- i) What models and practices can support on the job learning allowing workers to acquire the kinds of experiences and expertise that are valued by industry?
- ii) How best can workers be prepared as active learners to engage in productive learning in the workplace and meet the skill demands of industry?

The research comprises three annual phases premised on building an integrated body of investigations and outcomes through three progressive stages of: i) 'generation' (i.e. identifying approaches and models), ii) 'refinement' (i.e. appraising the capacity of these approaches and models to secure effective CET outcomes) and iii) 'alignment and implementation' (i.e. identifying how the national TET system can best implement those approaches and models deemed most effective). Data for the project are being secured through individual interviews and focus groups, discussion forums and feedback on discussion papers. Informants are workers, managers as well as industry and training representatives from different industry sectors and, kinds of work settings located in both regional and metropolitan centres and different representatives of VET stakeholder groups. In the first year, aged care and transport were selected as industry sectors.

For further information about the project please contact:

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VET in the Northern Territory

I am currently undertaking research into the question 'If VET is the answer – what was the question?' This work draws upon a number of research traditions such as auto-ethnography, sociology and anthropology in combination with the more traditional quantified reporting to understand how Vocational Education and Training is used by governments in terms of managing the population of Australia. Given that what was to become the VET sector was initially defined by what it was not (not schools nor universities), the resulting absence has given governments a very flexible technology that can be applied to almost any situation or issue. This work is not so much directed at who did something or even why they did it, but at the how.

As part of my Ph D research into government policy implementation in the context of VET, I have been able to use a wide range of resources to develop a timeline of significant events that have influenced VET in the NT since World War II. Some interesting factoids have been identified:

- The very first bill passed by the newly established Legislative Assembly in 1948 provided for the establishment of the Apprentices Board.
- The number of traditional trades apprentices was the same in 1979 as it was in 2009 with about 800 individuals in training even though the population of the NT had doubled.
- There have only been two governments in the NT since self-government in 1978, the Country Liberal Party for the first 26 years and Labour for the past decade and both have had all but identical approaches to VET and VET policy – clearly linked to economic and social development rather than general education.

More usefully, several clear trends have emerged, particularly since self-government. These include:

Creating and funding a number of public providers of VET from the mid-1970s followed by the gradual consolidation of provision into Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and Charles Darwin University.

Six different government agencies have held responsibility for apprenticeships since 1979 with control being contested between business and education portfolios

and their senior bureaucrats. This has been accompanied by a reduction of VET Advisory Committees to government from four in 1991 to zero in 2010. The state training authority has also moved from a quasi-independent board to being vested in the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Education and Training.

There has been an enormous appetite on the part of both the NT and Commonwealth governments to build public and private physical training infrastructure, particularly for Indigenous training, matched by an inverse enthusiasm to provide recurrent funding for program delivery and maintenance.

The NT Government has preferred regulation rather than directly delivering VET through the use of semi-autonomous colleges, private providers and a dual sector university model with the exception of some VET in schools, prisons and specialist health training. In a related manner, it seems likely that the impact of the short-lived Australian Technical College stimulated the NT to seriously address VET for secondary school students nearly two decades after most other jurisdictions had developed policies and programs in this area.

Don Zoellner, Charles Darwin University



AUSTRALIAN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
AND TRAINING RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

AVETRA 2012 - 15th Annual Conference

12 - 13 April 2012

Rydges Capital Hill Canberra, ACT

Theme:

The Value and Voice of VET Research for individuals, industry, community and the nation

Research in VET occurs in many different contexts and is carried out by a wide range of researchers and practitioners. As a community we do not often stop and evaluate the effects of our work and advocacy. This theme provides us with the opportunity to do exactly this. The theme encourages us to share our experiences in our particular research area within the broader context of the social, economic and political contributions that our work makes.

The conference will be structured around the following broad themes:

1. The economic and industry impacts of VET research
2. The social and community impacts of VET research
3. VET research and its relationship to policy formulation
4. The impacts of VET research on individual learners and groups of learners
5. The place and role of new researchers
6. The "voice" of VET research: Whose and who listens?
7. Comparative and historical perspectives in VET research

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Vocational education: Purposes, traditions and potential

Stephen Billett from the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University has just had his book on vocational education published by Springer Academic. Entitled *Vocational education: Purposes, traditions and potential* this book has been written over a four year period commencing in 2007.

Research Today posed a number of questions to the author about his new book.

What were the key motivations to write this book?

I guess there were two key motivations. Firstly, I have been teaching curriculum development in adult vocational education for many years. Yet, I have always had to rely upon curriculum textbooks from schooling which explain concepts associated with curriculum and its development. Hence, it seemed important to try to write a book that would address some of the key issues associated with curriculum and curriculum related issues associated with vocational education.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, I have not been able to identify a single text which addresses comprehensively what constitutes the project of vocational education. That is, the purposes, forms, objects, processes, institutions, governance and evaluation of what constitutes vocational education. Consequently, I was motivated to address this gap in the literature and write a book that responds to these issues. As it turns out, I am not sure I achieved either of these outcomes. That is, because the book is not really a textbook for curriculum development in adult vocational education, although it informs these issues.

Also it only partially addresses the range of topics required for a comprehensive account of the project of vocational education. But, I hope it is a helpful beginning of a larger project, and can be used to consider and inform the process of curriculum development in adult and vocational education. I also hope it elaborates some of the key foundational bases and issues for vocational education.

What were the easiest and most difficult parts of this task?

I am not sure there was an easy part. I was very fortunate to have accomplished research assistant who found a lot of

material that was very helpful and from sources which I probably would not have considered myself. Then, he carefully created PDF documents from the many sources he located and provided a filing and search system that allowed me to access these documents and have them with me at all times. This resource will be useful in the future for further publications about vocational education.

Yet, it did not take too long to become aware of the scale of the task which I had taken on. There are so many topics and disciplinary fields that need to be considered and, consequently, a range of literature on many of these topics. Then, there were interesting and diverse traditions associated with work and vocational education across many countries and cultures, and their histories that shape what constitutes vocational education systems in those places and at those times. I have included a fair bit of history, in the final manuscript, because it seemed to be important to outline some of the traditions, precepts and sentiments that have shaped not only the vocational education systems, but also many of the occupations that these systems serve.

It seemed important to try to write a book that would address some of the key issues associated with curriculum and curriculum related issues associated with vocational education.

It was both interesting and fascinating to engage with these historical and cross-cultural perspectives and also to identify enduring patterns which, to my mind, go a long way to explain the standing of vocational education and some of the difficulties it is experiencing in terms of realising its full potential. In all, it was an enormously rich learning experience for me. However, this was the most difficult of the books I have written to date.

How did the writing process proceed for you?

Because of the large and diverse body of literature with which I engaged, I soon came to realise that my original plans for the book were overly ambitious. For the first two and half years of the task I was engaging with such a wide, interesting and large body of literature that the task seemed almost overwhelming. I revised and re-ordered the structure of the overall manuscript and the chapters many times.

As it turns out, the volume which has just been published really arose from what was planned for only the first three chapters (i.e. purposes, traditions and curriculum). As the chapters grew and the arguments began to become more inclusive of the range of sources with which I was engaging it became necessary to divide the initial chapters up, and then again. The distinctions between what constitutes occupations and vocations, for instance, which commenced as a part of one chapter eventually became to chapters in themselves. Hence, a whole set of issues that were planned to be discussed in this volume were not able to be addressed. Perhaps those are ones I can return to at a later date.

How do you hope people will receive the book?

My hope is that people will find something helpful, interesting and informative within the book. It is not a written with a neatly developing single narrative, but each chapter having a particular theme which it elaborates and is intended to stand on its own. However, it is anticipated that those interested in or working in the field of vocational education will find issues of worth within it, albeit in quite different ways. Perhaps most importantly, I hope that the book can contribute to a better understanding about vocational education as a particular field of education, as well as vocational education being seen to be a system of education.

In addition, because I have tried to detail differences in the key objects of vocational education (i.e. occupations and vocations), and from this proposed a more expansive view of what constitutes vocational education than is often that which is exercised through institutional provision of this form of education, that are critical and more broader conception of it must become more commonplace.

Those interested in learning more about this book can find information on the Springer website:

www.springer.com/education+%26+language/book/978-94-007-1953-8

Bibliographic details

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