



Steven Hodge  
 President, AVETRA

“ A major commitment of AVETRA is to support research capacity development within the VET sector.

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

Welcome to the latest edition of *Research Today*! You may notice we have refreshed the look, but more importantly, we have taken a new approach to content. A major commitment of AVETRA is to support research capacity development within the VET sector. Support means a number of things. AVETRA has created the researcher development webinar series, which offers newcomers a very thorough grounding in craft of research. AVETRA’s OctoberVET series this year raises big questions about the context of VET, expanding our horizons and understanding of what research responds to and connects with. More initiatives are on the way to foster a questioning sector. But it is important that there is a forum for sharing information, details and insights from projects. The traditional academic option – submitting a manuscript to a journal – is certainly open to researchers within the sector, and AVETRA’s *International Journal of Training Research* is a good place to start if you want that kind of outlet. But there was scope for a more focused publication, devoted to the work of people in VET who are investigating industry innovations, or improving practices, or examining resources, or evaluating programs, etc. This is where *Research Today* comes in. We took the opportunity to re-focus this twice-yearly publication so that it serves as a new kind of journal. AVETRA’s other twice-yearly publication, A-News, will continue to provide up-to-date information on research and VET. But from this edition, *Research Today* charts a new course. The Editor, Andrew Williamson, explains the new editorial policy below.

Happy reading!



Andrew Williamson  
 Editor  
*Research Today*

## FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to AVETRA’s *Research Today* magazine.

This is my first turn as editor of *Research Today* and I am delighted to present a refreshed format and focus. AVETRA is proud to provide a platform for the sharing of contributions from first-time/early-career researchers alongside papers from seasoned VET researchers. Especially, we welcome the work of VET practitioners and those engaged in applied research with and for industry and the community.

I thank all of those who responded to the call for contributions to *Research Today*, especially those who feature in this edition. We have a terrific range of papers that reflect the passion, commitment and diversity of Australia’s VET sector.

I sincerely hope that you enjoy this edition of *Research Today*. The next edition will be released in May 2021, and I welcome enquiries from those considering contributing through email, at [andrew.williamson@holmesglen.edu.au](mailto:andrew.williamson@holmesglen.edu.au)

Finally, may I acknowledge the impressive (and rather daunting) standard set by the former editor of *Research Today*, Josie Misko. I am grateful for her generous support as the baton was passed.

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Editor:  
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# Curriculum development in response to industry needs in higher education by vocational institutions

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## Introduction

Currently in Australia there are 135 non university Higher Education Providers (NUHEPs) listed on the national register (Teqsa.gov.au, 2020a). Non university Higher Education Providers comprise both private colleges and publically funded Technical and Further Education (TAFE) vocational institutes. TAFE NUHEPs are mixed sector organisations whose main business is the delivery of vocational qualifications but who also deliver higher education qualifications. TAFE NUHEPs often develop applied degrees in areas in which successful vocational courses are also delivered and these courses benefit from the established close industry relationships that originate from these vocational education and training (VET) qualifications. A TAFE NUHEP Higher Education qualification is defined by learning that embraces both critical knowledge and practical skills; curriculum that has been benchmarked against comparable courses; industry support for program design and degrees that have a strong emphasis on employment outcomes and as such offer something distinct to the community.

One of the many strengths of vocational NUHEP institutes is the close proximity to vocational education. This proximity allows TAFE NUHEPs to be perfectly placed to offer a study pathway from a VET qualification into a higher education course. This learning continuum allows students to be supported throughout their education journey from a VET certificate, diploma or advanced diploma into a higher education qualification and eventual graduation with an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. Students from vocational NUHEP institutes who follow a transition pathway from vocational to higher education benefit from additional academic support and teaching staff that deeply engage and support each student in their chosen discipline. This transition pathway from vocational to higher education is an integral, important advantage of the NUHEP higher education landscape.

## Box Hill Institute

Box Hill Institute is a large Registered Training Organisation based in Melbourne, Victoria. In 2019 Box Hill Institute was a finalist in the 2019 Victorian Training Awards Large Training Provider of the Year category and is a finalist again in 2020 (Education.vic.gov.au. 2020). Box Hill Institute has three campuses. The City campus is co-located with the CAE, the Box Hill campus which has 3 sites (Whitehorse, Nelson & Elgar) and the Lilydale Lakeside campus. Box Hill Institute provides accredited, non-accredited, secondary vocational, post-secondary vocational and higher education to students and adult learners. Box Hill Institute delivers approximately 490 courses, including many courses delivered internationally and with industry.

Box Hill Institute aims to be a leader in the provision of higher education within a TAFE environment and to continue to deliver higher education courses in a focused set of areas of genuine domestic credibility that aligns with industry partners. In 2003, Box Hill Institute was approved as a non-

self-accrediting higher education provider and as such was one of the first Victorian TAFE Institutes to deliver bachelor degrees. The Box Hill Institute Master of International Music Business was among the first postgraduate master's degrees accredited in a mixed sector NUHEP in 2013.

Box Hill Institute currently has thirty-eight higher education Undergraduate Certificate to Master qualification courses accredited by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) in the following disciplines: Music (Performance, Composition, Sound Production, Music Business and Audio Production), Hospitality Management, Biosecurity, Computer Systems (Networking and Cyber Security), Fashion, Commerce, Early Childhood Education and Community Services (Teqsa.gov.au, 2020c). Six Box Hill Institute accredited courses have professional accreditation from industry bodies. Box Hill Institute degrees are delivered in small class sizes that offer a personalised learning environment where education programs can be tailored to individual needs and stimulate creativity and innovation. Box Hill Institute teachers know their students and they can support them in an individual way. The TAFE NUHEP niche degree, with an emphasis on quality teaching and industry association, emerges from the imperative to create a critically engaged and skilled workforce.

## Curriculum development

In 2016 Box Hill Institute was the recipient of a \$4 million grant from the Victorian Government to develop courseware and facilities to deliver a Certificate IV in Cyber Security and Advanced Diploma in Cyber Security in recognition of the global need for advanced cyber security. These vocational courses were developed for students who are interested in working in the information technology industry and are looking to develop their skills and knowledge required for a career as a cyber-security paraprofessional. The additional facilities included software, additional hardware (computers, networking facilities, servers and firewalls) and a complete Cyber Security Operations Centre (CSOC). The training Cyber Security Operations Centre was opened in 2018 and provides students with an opportunity to work in a realistic simulated learning environment designed by industry for incident responses.

The Certificate IV in Cyber Security is a Free TAFE Course for students who are eligible for government-subsidised training. The Free TAFE for Priority Courses initiative by the Victorian State Government covers the cost of tuition fees, for eligible students, for courses that have been identified as leading to jobs in demand.

"The demand for the (cybersecurity) workforce is expected to rise to 6 million (globally) by 2019, with a projected shortfall of 1.5 million," stated Michael Brown, CEO at Symantec, the world's largest security software vendor.

And the Cisco 2014 Annual Security Report warned that there were 1 million openings globally for information security professionals.

**“ The demand for the (cybersecurity) workforce is expected to rise to 6 million (globally) by 2019.**

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Since the launch of the Free TAFE for Priority Courses in January 2019 the number of students enrolled in the Certificate IV in Cyber Security have dramatically increased. In 2019 Box Hill Institute had 499 students enrolled in the Certificate IV in Cyber Security and 28 enrolled in the Advanced Diploma in Cyber Security.

As well as vocational information technology qualifications, Box Hill Institute also offers undergraduate and postgraduate computer systems higher education qualifications accredited by TEQSA. These qualifications include the Bachelor of Computer Systems, Associate Degree in Computer Systems, Diploma of Computer Systems, Undergraduate Certificate in Networking and Cybersecurity, Undergraduate Certificate in Information and Communication Technology, Graduate Certificate in Cybersecurity and a Graduate Diploma of Cyber Security. Given the growth of student numbers in vocational cyber security courses, the increasing importance of cyber security to industry and government, and the shortfall of cyber security professionals in the workforce, the higher education computer systems academic staff proposed to introduce a cyber security major into the Bachelor of Computer Systems. This change to the curriculum allowed a continuous transition pathway from the Certificate IV in Cyber Security into the Bachelor of Computer Systems, and then articulation to postgraduate study. Furthermore, the VET and HE sectors are able to share resources and the new cyber security facilities were appropriate for use in the subjects developed for the new Cyber Security major curriculum.

The Bachelor of Computer Systems course was re-accredited by TEQSA with two majors, Networking and Cloud Computing and Virtualisation in 2014. These two majors addressed different aspects of computer systems administration. To add a third major to the Bachelor of Computer Systems curriculum mid-course accreditation cycle is considered a major course change by TEQSA, and requires notification of a material change to the regulator as Box Hill Institute is a non self-accrediting higher education provider (Teqsa.gov.au, 2020b).

Each Box Hill Institute higher education discipline has a Course Advisory Committee, which is responsible for providing academic, and industry advice on the development and maintenance of the curriculum for Box Hill Institute's higher education programs. The rationale requesting the addition of a third major in Cyber Security to the Bachelor of Computer Systems was tabled at the Computer Systems Course Advisory Committee for endorsement. Following endorsement by the Computer Systems Course Advisory Committee, the major in Cyber Security course change was approved by the Academic Board before formal notification of the material change to TEQSA. The new Cyber Security major was successfully introduced into course delivery in 2019 following notification to TEQSA, and is the most popular of the three Bachelor of Computer Systems majors offered.

## Conclusion

Degrees at TAFE NUHEPs prepare graduates to meet the challenges inherent in the 21st century employment environment. TAFE NUHEP degrees focus on the pedagogy around the graduate outcomes essential to equip our graduates with the necessary knowledge and skills to successfully compete in the labour market. The example presented here provides evidence of how new programs in vocational institutions can draw on existing strengths, and can create new opportunities for both institutions and their student. ■

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## WHAT IS VOCEDPLUS?

VOCEDplus is NCVER's free international research database for tertiary education, especially as it relates to workforce needs, skills development, and social inclusion.

It encompasses vocational education and training (VET), higher education, adult and community education, informal learning, and VET in Schools. It is international in scope and contains over 80,000 English language records, many with links to full text documents.

It also provides access to several value-added resources including:

- The VET Knowledge Bank contains a suite of complementary products that together provide a collected memory of reference information about Australia's vocational education and training system.
- The Pod Network provides a single-entry point to collections of research and resources. These collections are presented within themed Pods with more specific sub-topics presented within smaller Pods called Podlets.
- The VET Practitioner Resource draws on VOCEDplus, NCVER products and external links to present a range of information, both free and for purchase, designed to support VET practitioners in their teaching and assessment practice and in undertaking research.



## AVETRA'S REPOSITORY OF RESEARCH RESOURCES

Ever wondered how to begin research, or how you yourself got started on your research journey? If so, you are not alone! Many early career researchers in the VET sector have been expressing the need for some means of readily accessing resources that would help them get started. This repository has been developed for you.

Check out the range of research resources on the AVETRA website: [avetra.org.au/pages/resources.html](http://avetra.org.au/pages/resources.html)



# AMEP Delivery in COVID-19: Service provider, teacher and student experiences of a period of unprecedented disruption

By LWA (RTO 3911)

## Background

The first Australian case of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was identified at the end of January 2020 in the state of Victoria. The number of new cases initially grew sharply resulting in the Australian National Cabinet introducing restrictions on social and economic activities in order to flatten the COVID -19 transmission curve.

Implementing a successful suppression/elimination strategy significantly affected the delivery of Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) on a nation-wide basis (for more about the AMEP go to <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/amep/about-the-program>). The Department of Home Affairs commissioned LWA, the quality assurance provider, to provide a report documenting AMEP service provider and client feedback on the transition of AMEP from Face-to-Face (F2F) delivery to Virtual Participation (VP) delivery for Term 2 – 20 April to 26 June 2020. VP involved delivery of English language tuition on a virtual platform or digital app, such as Skype, ZOOM or WhatsApp, in contrast to face-to-face tuition delivered in a classroom.

LWA's findings stem from data collected using online surveys with students, teachers and managers.

This report documents AMEP service provider management, AMEP teacher and AMEP student experiences on the effect COVID-19 has had on the AMEP and summarises their responses.

## Survey Findings

AMEP managers, AMEP teachers/assessors and AMEP students nationwide provided responses to online surveys which were accessible through the web-based application, SurveyMonkey, in May 2020. Interpreting services were also made available to support clients with low levels of English to participate in the survey. Refer to Appendix 1 for survey questions.

Respondents	Number
Student	2282
Teacher	380
Management	62

## Student Survey

Responses from 2282 students (over 20% of students in the program) were recorded.

- At the time of the survey, 96% of respondents were engaged in AMEP delivery from home.
- Mobile phone and computer were the most common devices used to engage in AMEP outside the classroom at 39% and 41%, respectively.
- The top five countries represented by respondents in order were China (366 respondents), Iraq (262), Iran (130), Thailand (112) and Vietnam (110).

“Implementing a successful suppression/elimination strategy significantly affected the delivery of Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) on a nation-wide basis.

- 24% were Humanitarian visa holders

The survey largely reflects the views of students who were studying from home, thus having the hardware, software and having or developing technical abilities to participate.

## Positive Experiences

The survey results indicated a number of positive features relating to the COVID-19 changes to alternative delivery of AMEP through VP.

- 60% liked studying at home as it gave them flexibility to study at different times allowing more time to work (72%), and more time for family commitments, especially for those home-schooling children (80%)
- They recognised their improved skills and confidence from their changed modes of delivery. *'I have improved my technology skills as well as my English skills'* is representative of several comments received
- 77% thought that their language improved during this period, however when asked to compare studying at home and in the classroom, 72% thought that their language improved more in the classroom
- 41% would like the opportunity to have classes online and face to face

## Challenging Experiences

A number of respondents did not like learning English at home with a small portion disliking the use of technology to learn English.

## Students' Perspective

The AMEP cohort clearly indicated they preferred to learn English both at home and in the classroom. A flexible delivery model which permits a portion of classroom F2F as well as a portion of learning at home through VP was suggested by AMEP student responses.

## Teacher Survey

Responses from 380 teachers were recorded.

## Positive Experiences

Survey responses indicated several positive features relating to the new arrangements for AMEP delivery resulting from COVID-19 restrictions.

- Teachers indicated the flexibility of using technology to deliver AMEP worked well for many students
  - 70% found students who were employed and/or seeking employment benefitted from the flexibility provided with changes in delivery

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- 56% found students with caring duties benefitted from the flexibility provided by the changes in delivery
- Teachers noted positive changes in the virtual classroom environment with development of students' literacy skills and improvement in IT skills
- Teachers' digital literacy English language teachings skills improved; they developed a creative and flexible approach to online delivery/assessment
- 67% recognised ways to measure gains in Digital Literacy skills (e.g. evidence of work completed online, participation in virtual classes, uploading and sharing information, using functions such as whiteboard, chat rooms)
- 55% indicated the change had a positive impact on students' English language progression
- 56% identified new ways to measure English language progression (e.g. interactive online assessment, receipt of photos of written work, before and after diagnostic assessment, regular questionnaires/ surveys, completing curriculum units)
- 30% would like mixed mode delivery to continue

### Challenging Experiences

Teachers reported challenges experienced during the rapid transition from F2F to VP delivery.

- 50% indicated the transition period was difficult with stressful (41%) the most common response
- 44% indicated their students struggled with the changes in delivery
  - noting technology as the most common challenge for their students
  - recording technology difficulties (such as issues with connectivity and student access to IT devices)
  - finding the needs of Humanitarian students could not be met satisfactorily with AMEP delivery outside the classroom
- 34% identified the difficulty they experienced managing online delivery (responses included lack of confidence/ability to deliver online, no control over authorship of work submitted, limited resources immediately available to support online delivery)
- Students with low level English language skills presented additional challenges in conducting assessments and delivering sessions online.

### Teachers' Perspective

There were several challenges associated with the rapid change to the new methods of delivery, however, teachers found the changes in AMEP delivery to be effective and rewarding for themselves as well as for many students.

The application of a variety of technology devices, web-based platforms and apps resulted in an improvement in teachers' digital literacy English language teachings skills.

## Management Survey

Survey responses from 62 managers were received.

### Positive Experiences

Responses indicated several positive features relating to COVID-19 delivery changes.

- Digital literacy skills for both teachers and students improved
- The changes improved AMEP delivery in a number of ways; the most common responses were client engagement and diversity of delivery, equally represented at 36%
- Many students embraced VP enthusiastically
- Some students who had disengaged from AMEP, prior to COVID-19 restrictions, re-engaged with the introduction of VP delivery
- 69% identified ways to measure Digital Literacy in the new environment
- (e.g. IT skills test, teacher observation/other evidence of engaging in virtual classroom activities)
- 68% felt the change to AMEP delivery had a positive impact on students' English language progression with 55% identifying new ways to measure the progress
- (e.g. complete curriculum unit; interactive and electronic activities; use of online platforms such as Zoom, web chat, MS Teams, to record evidence of writing, speaking, listening skills; teacher developed and validated locally contextualised assessments)
- 87% identified benefits for those employed or seeking employment as studying at home gave students more time to work or look for work
- 68% reported AMEP delivery outside the classroom enabled students to work in with caring responsibilities/ family commitments
- 62% would like the flexibility in AMEP delivery to continue after COVID-19

### Challenging Experiences

- 74% of respondents described the changes in AMEP delivery as challenging with 35% identifying technology as the greatest challenge
- 63% indicated the needs of Humanitarian cohorts could not be met with AMEP delivery outside the classroom. Lack of F2F (with the associated social interaction) represented the most common reason (37%) for not meeting the needs of Humanitarian cohorts.
- Difficulty conducting Initial Assessments with students who have low English language ability

### Managers' Perspective

It was a rapid transition to take a program to VP in a very limited time frame. Managers indicated being *well prepared* and engaging in *collaboration* supported the transition.

Many managers expressed surprise that the students engaged as much as they did. Innovative teaching practices abounded with teachers and students trying an array of different virtual teaching/learning strategies and resources. The introduction of VP delivery resulted in a return to AMEP for some students who had disengaged from AMEP, prior to COVID-19 restrictions.

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AMEP managers indicated the change to AMEP delivery by VP had a positive impact on students' English language progression, describing the period as a significant upskilling which has been rewarding in the AMEP field. AMEP managers clearly indicated their preference for ongoing flexibility in AMEP delivery and advocated for a funding model which supported a diversity of delivery methods.

## Conclusion

AMEP students, teachers and managers were all challenged by the extent and speed of change to delivery in response to COVID-19. Despite this, many positives were reported, such as increased innovative practices, knowledge sharing and delivery flexibility.

Many students responded enthusiastically to the innovative delivery approaches with engagement and, in some cases, re-engagement in the AMEP. The development trial and application of innovative delivery methods maintained student interest and engagement in AMEP. However, it also highlighted the difficulties experienced by some cohorts around accessibility and delivery.

Flexible delivery models, with flexible delivery methods, and flexible classroom times met the needs of the majority of students that took part in the survey.

Improvement in digital literacy skills was noted for both AMEP teachers and students. Survey results noted the need for a continued focus on professional development to improve digital literacy English language teaching skills of AMEP teachers. Capturing and reporting AMEP students' digital literacy skill gains e.g. through implementing the Digital Skills Framework, was suggested.

Technology was the most influential change agent during COVID-19 delivery. Students, teachers, and managers responded well to aspects of the VP experience in AMEP COVID-19 delivery. The data gathered during this time period has provided all AMEP stakeholders with insights into the needs of the AMEP service providers and client cohorts, and ideas on the actions and support needed for the AMEP in future. ■

**“ Flexible delivery models, with flexible delivery methods, and flexible classroom times met the needs of the majority of students that took part in the survey.**

## Appendix A: Survey Questions

### Student survey questions with response options

1. Are you doing AMEP at home?  
Yes/No – I prefer going to the classroom/it is not possible to study at home
2. How do you do AMEP at home?  
Mobile phone/Computer/Home phone(landline)/Paper sent by my teacher
3. Do you like doing AMEP at home?  
Yes /No /Sometimes
4. Reasons students like doing AMEP from home  
Learning English at home/Using technology/Being able to study at different times
5. Reasons students don't like doing AMEP from home  
Learning English at home/Using technology/Being able to study at different times
6. Learning English at home is...  
easy/hard/flexible/interesting/fun
7. Which do you prefer? (Choose one)  
Learning English at home/Learning English in the classroom/I would like to do both
8. During COVID-19, is your English improving?  
Yes/no
9. Does your English improve more in the classroom or when you study at home?  
Home/classroom
10. Do you think AMEP at home would give you more time to work?  
Yes/no
11. Doing AMEP at home gives you more time to care for your family  
Yes/no

### Teacher survey questions

1. Please identify
  - a. three ways AMEP tuition has improved under the new arrangements
  - b. three challenges associated with your teaching during this change to AMEP delivery
  - c. if applicable, successes and/or challenges associated with delivering an Initial Assessment during this change to AMEP delivery
  - d. three aspects of the new arrangements that worked well for students during this change to AMEP delivery
  - e. three challenges for your students during this change to AMEP delivery
2. Do you think AMEP delivery outside the classroom meets the needs of
  - a. Humanitarian cohorts?
  - b. those with caring responsibilities?
  - c. those who are employed or seeking employment?

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3. Have you measured English language progression during this period?
4. Can you identify
  - a. new ways to measure English language progression in this environment
  - b. ways to measure Digital Literacy in this environment?
5. Do you think the change to AMEP delivery has had a positive impact on students' English language progression?
6. Did professional development sessions provided by LWA assist you/your teachers?
7. Can you identify professional development sessions you would like offered in the future?
8. How would you describe the transition to the change in delivery?
9. How would you describe AMEP delivery during this period?
10. Please identify three AMEP activities you would like to continue after COVID-19.

### Manager Survey questions

Managers responded to the same questions as the teachers without 1(d) and 1(e)

## ISSI FELLOWSHIP REPORTS REPOSITORY

The aim of the International Specialised Skills (ISS) Institute is to develop a 'Better Skilled Australia'. The ISS Institute provides Fellowships to Australians to undertake international applied research and skills enhancement.

Fellowships provide the opportunity to identify problems, skill gaps or areas requiring innovation and enable our Fellows to travel overseas to identify best-practice ways of addressing these. All Fellows are expected to provide detailed recommendations so that new approaches and better ways of working can be implemented in an Australian context. All Fellows are supported by ISS Institute to prepare and publish a Fellowship Report recording literature, data, findings, and recommendations formulated during their international applied research trip.

Fellowship reports can be accessed at [www.issinstitute.org.au/fellowships/fellowship-reports/](http://www.issinstitute.org.au/fellowships/fellowship-reports/)



# How have people been learning about COVID-19-related matters? Overview findings

Erica Smith, Federation University Australia and Morgan Wise, Federation University Australia and Ballarat Health Services<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The 'Learning to be Safer' project was undertaken in mid-2020 to gain insight into how Australian people learn about information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project, an on-line survey, focused on four matters: health information, restrictions and closures, the progress of the pandemic nationally and internationally, and financial provisions. The research is significant because information dissemination has been crucial both in attempting to manage the pandemic and to reduce potential stress on individuals. There are also social justice implications about equitable access to information. As the same issues are being faced internationally, the project has significance for other countries.

The research question for the project was 'In what way did Australian adults learn about aspects of the pandemic during the early months of the 2020 crisis?' The research went into the field in late June, at a time when the coronavirus crisis appeared to be improving, but shortly afterwards Victoria began its 'second wave' which probably affected response rates and the nature of responses alike. The project, 'Learning to be Safer', used similar survey techniques to a 2019 Federation University project, 'Learning to be Greener', which found how people learned about recycling and plastic bag use (see Smith, 2019). This paper presents an overview of the project findings.

## Literature

During the period of the research, the literature gradually developed. Initial peer-reviewed publications were mainly health-related (e.g. Guan et al, 2020) but more literature on the actual and potential economic and thus the social effects followed swiftly (e.g. World Economic Forum 2020, Pouliakas & Branka, 2020, Whalley & Kaur, 2020). Mapping the spread of the virus was of course a major concern (e.g. Zhou et al, 2020; Griffin, 2020). As time went on, literature was published on how to end lockdowns (e.g. Rawson et al, 2020). Our survey covered the effects on the general public of all of these aspects of the pandemic.

## Method

Ethics committee approval was gained for the project. The Survey Monkey link was distributed to staff of a university whose campuses were mainly in Victoria. Staff were invited to forward the link to family and friends aged 18 and over. Care was taken in all communications to acknowledge the difficult and stressful environment at the time, and to underline that participation was voluntary.

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to Erica Smith at e.smith@federation.edu.au



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The survey was carried out from 22 June until 6 August 2020.

At the time the survey went into the field, it seemed that the worst of the pandemic was over in Australia. But cases soon rose quickly, especially in Victoria where daily cases briefly reached over 700 at the height of the second wave of infections in late July. Data collection paused at the start of the second, harsher, Melbourne lockdown, in early July, to try to avoid distress as far as possible, with a planned reminder delayed until the last few days of July.<sup>2</sup>

The survey instrument began with demographic questions, questions about people's life satisfaction and optimism, based on a European Union survey (Eurofound, 2020), and about additional stressors that might affect their experience of the pandemic. The bulk of the survey focused on four topics of learning during the coronavirus crisis in Australia: health information, restrictions and closures, the progress of the pandemic nationally and internationally, and financial provisions. Potential sources of information were divided into 'Media' and 'Non-media' sources. These two lists were based on the previous research project (Smith, 2019), which had drawn on survey questions on adults' learning about the Scottish referendum (Crowther, Boeren & Mackie, 2018). For each topic, respondents were asked to reflect on their awareness, and understanding of, the topics in March, at the beginning of the pandemic in Australia, and in late June/July; and then to indicate which listed sources they learned from. The survey concluded with questions about how they would have liked to have learned about the matters covered, and seeking suggestions about information dissemination. These questions were qualitative. The survey was long, but the four sections followed a standard pattern to aid comprehension, and the average time taken by respondents was only 15 minutes. Just over 100 people answered all quantitative questions, with around 70 answers to many of the qualitative questions.

## Findings

There were 128 responses, mostly from the state of Victoria. The numbers of responses was lower than expected, and compared to the previous project, possibly because of the sensitive nature of the topic. There were limitations of the data, for example gender distribution was skewed (73.4% female); as was level of employment and of qualification. 82.1% of respondents were aged 40 and over. 20.3% lived in metropolitan areas, with 59.4% in regional areas and 20.3% identifying as rural and remote.

On a five-point scale, two-thirds agreed or strongly agreed that they were optimistic about their future in late March, but only 53.9% said the same for the time of completing the survey. On a life satisfaction scale of 1 to 10, while 71.4% responded in the top half of the scale, only 11.9% gave responses of 9 or 10, where 10 was 'very satisfied'. The most common stressors (from a provided list) during the COVID-19 crisis were reported as:

- 'Commenced working remotely as a result of the crisis' (80.0%),
- 'You or an immediate family member have a health issue which creates extra risk during the pandemic' (40.7%),
- 'You have a caring responsibility for a child or children' (37.3%) or a parent (24.6%), with 26.3% home-schooling children

28.0% of respondents had a family member who had experienced a job loss or reduction of working hours, but only 13.6% of the respondents themselves were experiencing financial stress.

Table 1 summarises responses to questions about people's understandings of the four topics of the survey. The table represents only the highest level of response, i.e. 'very important' (as opposed to 'somewhat' or 'not important'), or 'high' (as opposed to 'medium' or 'low')

**Table 1. Participants' views about the four topics**

Topic	Degree of importance to them of obtaining information (i) – % 'very' answers	Current level of interest at time of survey – % 'high' answers	Level of understanding of the topic in March and at time of survey – % 'high' answers
Relevant health information	85.9	68.2	March – 56.1 Current – 75.7
Restrictions and closures (ii)	68.2	66.4	March – 66.4 Current – 78.5
Progress of the pandemic (iii)	80.5	76.6	March – 60.8 Current – 73.8
Available financial provisions	16.8	21.5	March – 18.7% June – 22.9%

Notes:

(i) The full question was 'how important has it been to you to obtain information about...'

The full item was 'restrictions of movement and closure of business and venues'

The full item was 'the progress of the pandemic in Australian and overseas'

<sup>2</sup> The survey questions can be viewed on the RAVE research group web site at <http://federation.edu.au/schools/school-of-education/research/research-groups/rave-researching-adult-and-vocational-education>



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It is clear that the first three matters were very important to respondents, with health the most important concern overall, followed by the progress of the pandemic. By July, though, there was most interest in the topic 'progress of the pandemic', with 76.6% reporting high levels of interest. There was greater understanding of all matters in July compared with March, with the largest growth being in health understanding. Table 1 shows that relatively little importance was ascribed to financial information, presumably because most respondents were in steady employment; however, qualitative comments showed that people had concerns on behalf of others in society.

What about the sources of information from which people reported learning? People responded for 18 items under 'media sources' and 9 items under 'non-media' sources, being asked to tick which they used, and then which was the most important. Some sources of information predominated in responses. With only two minor exceptions, only two preferred sources were named for both media and non-media categories. Of the media sources, 'Television- government announcements and press conferences' and 'Web pages - Australian government' were ticked by most participants, and were also chosen as the 'most important' sources, for all four information topics. In contrast to the earlier project on recycling and plastic bag use (Smith, 2019), social media and community flyers were very minor sources of information, with people clearly preferring to rely on official sources that were perceived as reliable. 'Friends and family' and 'workplace information' were overwhelmingly the major non-media learning sources. Workplace information was the most important of these two for health and 'restrictions' information and 'friends and family' for the other two topics.

When were asked to provide reasons for their choice of 'most important' source. When referring to TV and government sources, the words most often used were 'immediate' 'live' or 'reliable'. They used similar words when discussing 'workplace information', in the non-media section. When referring to friends and family they also spoke of trust, but also mentioned the chance to discuss and reflect; or to speak of the extra information they could learn from the contacts because of the work they did or the knowledge that they had. For example, many people mentioned contacts overseas, or in the health professions.

Some simple but effective ideas for providing better information about COVID-related matters were suggested by survey respondents. These included household flyers, either in mailbox drops or sent by post; posters displayed in communities; a daily five-minute update broadcast through all media; and text messages from local councils. Many argued for the availability of information in different languages and appropriate for different groups, such as for those with mental health issues. Some later respondents suggested official webinar sessions or video information, while some earlier responses suggested courses offered by education or community education providers. All of these ideas could be implemented immediately; and would certainly be useful in future crises.

## Conclusion

The project clearly showed that in times of crisis, people were turning to official sources of information which they viewed as trustworthy. They were also relying on very well-established media, i.e. broadcast television. Further analysis will investigate whether different respondent groups of people had different approaches to learning about the crisis; and will analyse by

date of response, to see if there are links to developments in the pandemic. Responses, particular those after the first few days, would have been heavily influenced by the Victorian developments as they unfolded during this period; the survey results may have been quite different in other States. It is likely that similar surveys in some other countries would produce results more closely aligned to our survey. ■

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## OCTOBERVET 2020 IS ON!

AVETRA's annual showcase of VET research is on again. Given the challenges of this year, OctoberVET events are being conducted online.

We encourage all our Research Today readers to get involved! Check out the range of OctoberVET events here: [avetra.org.au/pages/octobervet-.html](http://avetra.org.au/pages/octobervet-.html)



Skills and Ako Aotearoa have partnered to bring this year's **New Zealand Vocational Education and Training**



**Research Forum (NZVETRF)** to life on 12 November 2020. Find out more at: [www.vocationalforum.org.nz](http://www.vocationalforum.org.nz)

# Improving VET outcomes: International applied research on meaningful and Sustainable Industry Engagement Models (SIEM)

By Sameer Mathur  
 Founder & CEO  
 Careers In Care Pty Ltd.

Over the past few decades technological advancements, shifting demographics and increased pressure from overseas competitors have made the Australian labour market more service based. Hence, the ability to train Victorians quickly and effectively, and then re-train them when technology and circumstances change, is crucial to ensure that every Victorian actively participates and contributes to building the Australian economy.

The vocational education sector in Australia is best known as the sector which trains people for jobs; however, expert reviews of the Vocational Education and Training sector have revealed several areas of concern including:

- slow qualification development processes
- complex and confusing funding models, and
- ongoing quality issues with training providers

These concerns are backed up by empirical evidence. Employer surveys show confidence in the sector declining, and numbers of qualification-seeking students decreasing<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, the lack of meaningful industry engagement to validate vocational training practices has been identified as one of the major reasons for the diminishing confidence of VET stakeholders. Vocational training and assessment practices without meaningful industry engagement and Work Integrated Learning often fall short of creating real workplace environments and may result in issuing AQF qualifications to individuals who do not possess the skills and knowledge to meet industry requirements. Risks associated with such practices have far reaching impacts on workplace health and safety due to a lack of industry skills and this in turn impacts business productivity and economic growth. This is one of the major reasons why skill shortages have been a consistent issue for many occupations in the business & community services sectors for most of the last decade.

## Research Objectives

The focus of my international applied research Fellowship was to identify and research meaningful and sustainable Industry Engagement Models (IEM) in the Vocational Education and Training sector in Europe. The applied research work also focused on identifying best practice vocational training models that are most effective in improving vocational training outcomes especially in business, leadership and management qualifications.

<sup>1</sup> © Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Strengthening Skills

## KEY RESEARCH PARAMETERS

- > **Focus of current Vocational Education and Training practices and expected learning outcomes**
  - understand articulation between vocational training and industry skill shortages
- > **Key strengths and opportunities**
  - identify strategies that work best to attain desired learning objectives
- > **Industry engagement strategies**
  - research and investigate industry engagement models
- > **Role of industry in Vocational Education and Training**
  - understand collaborative learning arrangements between employers and vocational learners
- > **Training and assessment methodologies as informed by industry**
  - learn about innovative training methodologies targeted to educatelearners on specific industry requirements
- > **Quality initiatives to ensure regulatory compliance**
  - benchmark best practice regulatory compliance strategies
- > **Curriculum development and design strategies**
  - understand and research pedagogy around most effective vocational training strategies
- > **Expected VET outcomes and continuous improvement strategies**
  - benchmark best practice quality assurance models in vocational training design and development.

## Research Methodology

Initial research was conducted by visiting vocational training providers in Victoria, meeting subject matter experts and local employers.

It was important not to become associated or aligned with one group of stakeholders as this could have narrowed the research outcomes and imposed a risk of the research becoming skewed or led by a stakeholder attribute.

Following the initial research, I travelled across Europe meeting several influential VET professionals, subject matter experts, research scholars and VET graduates.

The research Fellowship methodology included:

- online research
- face to face meetings
- interviews
- telephone conversations

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- visiting vocational training institutes
- engaging in impromptu discussions with a wide range of professionals in one-on-one and group settings
- distributing questionnaire to students, employers, and VET professionals

In addition to the above, I drew on my industry experience in regulatory compliance auditing, risk management and governance practices in the VET sector over the past decade which included time spent conducting RTO compliance audits.

## Research Context

Currently in Victoria, VET enrolment numbers are decreasing, and employers are reporting a decrease in satisfaction with training outcomes.

Out of 4.2 million Australians participating in vocational training each year, half of the learners are enrolled in short courses often for regulatory reasons. Around 43 percent are trained in vocational AQF qualifications out of which 80 percent are in institutional VET qualifications and only 20 percent in formal traineeships and apprenticeships.

Data from the National Apprentice and Trainee Collection, provides estimates of activity for apprentices and trainees in Victoria and demonstrates the trends associated with commencements, cancellations and completions. The 2019 data indicates that:

- commencement is down 5.6% from June 2018
- completion rate is down by 3.1% from June 2018

## Data collection

My Fellowship research was conducted across the months of September and October 2019 and included a range of activities to identify & investigate sustainable Industry Engagement Models in the UAE, Switzerland, Germany, and Sweden over a period of 6 weeks.

I engaged in face-to-face and online interviews with influential VET stakeholders backed by site visits and online research. Additionally, I drew on my extensive compliance auditing, quality assurance and training experience in the VET sector over the past decade which included time spent conducting compliance audits and reviewing assessment instruments in consultation with employers.

## Key findings

The key learnings from my research included obvious differences in the VET industry engagement models based on labour market needs and socioeconomic infrastructure of a country.

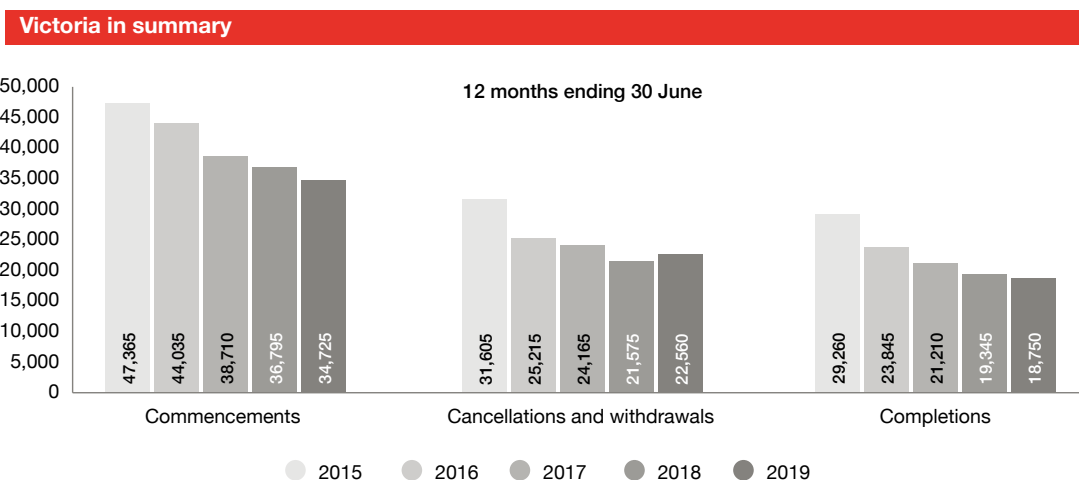
There were also striking similarities noticed that clearly pointed towards commitment to create an effective and sustainable vocational training infrastructure that builds a stronger future ready workforce and contributes significantly to economic growth.

## Recommendations

Based on the research findings it is evident that a lack of meaningful industry engagement to validate vocational training practices is one of the major reasons for the diminishing confidence of VET stakeholders.

The research findings also point towards an immediate and growing need for a better aligned continuing education system for VET trainers and assessors. A well-integrated system that assesses capabilities of trainers and assessors and provides responsive training is a critical component of a robust VET sector. A disjointed vocational training framework is bound to result in issuing prestigious AQF qualifications to learners who do not possess the job skills and knowledge required to meet industry guidelines.

This outcome is extremely concerning as it raises several questions relating to the integrity of vocational training practices and VET quality frameworks.



Apprenticeship and trainees 2019: June quarter – Victoria

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Recommendations to address the above issues include:

1. The VET regulatory body should facilitate active engagement between training providers (RTOs) and employers to create opportunities for Work Integrated Learning.
2. Every VET qualification, without any exceptions should have a compulsory Work-Based Training component with minimal reliance on simulated assessments.
3. Training providers should engage with employers in their local area to develop customised training programs to address skill shortages.
4. Every VET graduate must sit the 'National Employability Skills Test' to determine their job readiness and further training needs.
5. Develop 'National Competency Assessment Framework' for VET trainers and assessors to train and assess their understanding of pedagogical learning and competency-based training on an ongoing basis.
6. Set up a compliance framework for 'licensing of VET trainers and assessors' across Australia to address concerns around varying quality of training and assessment practices.
7. Greater focus on building a sustainable vocational training framework which facilitates hands-on learning as opposed to classroom training. This will help build an indigenous skilled workforce for a sustainable future and stable economic growth. ■

Link to report from which the summary is reproduced:

<https://www.issinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Mathur-Final.pdf>

Careers In Care works with local employers in Melbourne's South East to develop and implement meaningful Job Ready Programs with compulsory Work Integrated Learning. If you are an Employer and wish to participate in this program, please get in touch with us.

Enquiries may be addressed to the founder & CEO of Careers In Care Pty Ltd. ([ceo@careersincare.com.au](mailto:ceo@careersincare.com.au))

*Sameer Mathur is an International Specialised Skills Institute Fellow (2019) sponsored by Higher Education and Skills Group, Department of Education and Training (Victorian Government)*

## AVETRA WEBINAR SERIES

As Australia's peak national VET research association, AVETRA plays an important role in connecting early career and emerging VET researchers with peers and mentors. In 2020, we are excited to announce a new webinar series, aimed at connecting our membership from across Australia and providing an opportunity for engaging with key VET issues and researcher capability development.

Get involved at

[avetra.org.au/pages/upcoming-events.html](http://avetra.org.au/pages/upcoming-events.html)

## Special education needs is everybody's business

Felicity Williams

There exists a group of people for whom day-to-day living in a literacy-based society presents unique challenges. They live within societal expectations that all members should be able to read and write – but they experienced failure within an education system that provided limited recognition of the learning needs for people with learning difficulties or neurodiverse conditions such as dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Into adulthood, undiagnosed learning difficulties have resulted in adults carrying significant challenges that impact many areas of their life including lack of self-esteem and confidence, inability to control behaviour, anger and impulses, poorer health and well-being outcomes due to illiteracy, and potential to become involved in the justice system and/or problematic drug use, including self-medication. Of concern is that undiagnosed (or unmanaged) learning difficulties (specifically ADHD or dyslexia) have been found through Australian and international research studies to be prevalent in up to and possibly over 50% of the prison population.<sup>1</sup>

Adult Community Education (ACE) providers in Australia play a vital role in supporting people with low educational attainment and various barriers to access and engage in formal education on a day-to-day basis, including those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and those experiencing a range of challenges including mental health issues, disability, gender, alcohol and drug issues and interaction with the justice system. Due to the cohort we are dealing with, we know that a proportion of our learners may have an underlying learning difficulty that has prevented them from achieving successful outcomes through the mainstream school system. But funding and vocational education and training (VET) practitioner training models fail to adequately provide for assessing and supporting these learners.

Consequently, I was very interested to learn more about the universal and holistic approach further education colleges in the UK have developed to support neurodiverse learners. These colleges recognise special education needs or SEN not only through curriculum and support programs, but in the way they invest in, train and deploy their workforce. I travelled to the UK to learn about their approach through an International Specialised Skills Institute (ISSI) Fellowship in March 2020.

During my ISSI Fellowship, I had the opportunity to spend a day in two further education colleges in the United Kingdom (UK): Leeds City College (Yorkshire County) and Weston College (Weston Super-Mare). An overwhelming theme was the whole-of-organisation approach each College dedicated to and invested in supporting learners with SEN.

SEN or SEND (the latter adding disability into the context) is an acronym that has become an integral part of the vernacular throughout the European Union's education sector. This has ensured that, particularly over the past decade, the needs of SEN learners are holistically and systemically addressed.

<sup>1</sup> Hewitt-Main, J (2012) *Dyslexia Behind Bars*. Mentoring 4U, UK.  
Moore, E et al (2016) Adult ADHD Among NSW Prisoners: Prevalence and Psychiatric Comorbidity. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, Vol. 20 (11) 958-967.



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The theory being that excellent practice for SEN learners is excellent practice for all learners and ensures that all learners receive support as and when they need it to succeed.

Both Colleges recognise that many of their learners invariably have a wide range of learning conditions that range from profound through to as yet unidentified milder conditions that have nevertheless resulted in underachievement in the school system.

According to Dr Paul Philips, Principal and CEO of Weston College (affectionately known by all as Dr Paul), when he arrived in 2001 special education learners were housed in a shed. One of his first actions was to bring them and their program inside the campus, and house them in the room immediately adjacent to his (the principal's) office – sending a very strong message to the College. He grasped the opportunity for change and focused the new strategic plan on embracing and directly dealing with the learning difficulties and mental health needs of all learners, and also staff.

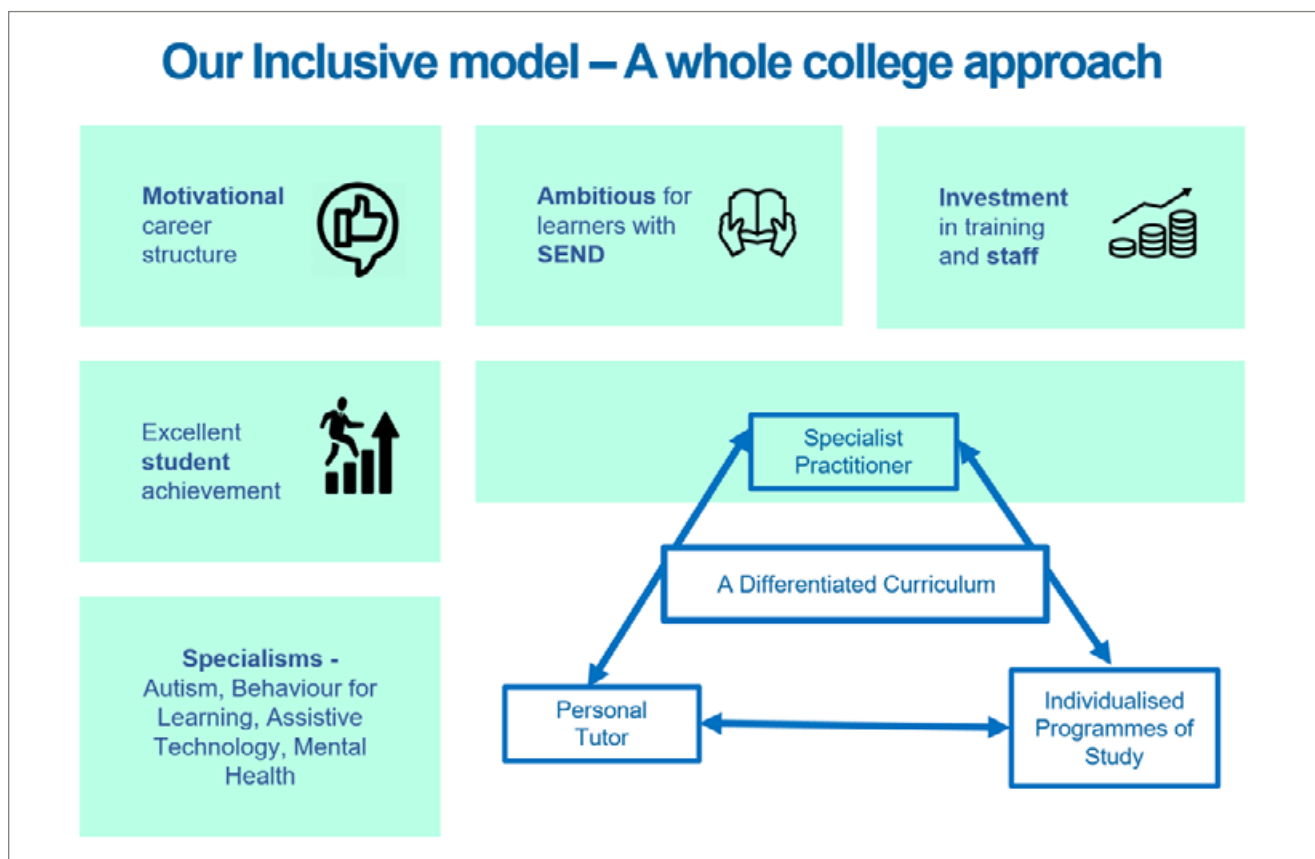
Since 2013 when the UK Government introduced SEND reforms, there has been a 78% increase in high needs places in general further education colleges. This was partly the result of special needs being more adequately and properly recognised through high needs funding mechanisms, and also legislated learner and carer agency.<sup>2</sup> In order to successfully deal with this influx of high needs learners arriving with the expectation that learning and associated support opportunities would be substantial and aspirational, further education colleges had to rapidly develop effective, efficient and innovative whole-of-college approaches.

Dr Paul conveyed a very strong message that Weston College's direction was firmly aimed at not only transforming the college, but on transforming the lives of SEND learners, exceeding the expectations of others, including parents and carers. The benefits of both being and, being seen to be, an inclusive organisation include:

- develops consistent outstanding practice, not just for SEND learners, but all learners
- widening participation and increased student numbers
- raises aspirations of staff, learners and partners
- innovation and fresh approaches leading to a more attractive organisation
- enhanced reputation
- efficient and high-quality approaches to teaching and learning
- excellent retention and success rates
- positive progression to meaningful and sustainable outcomes
- a responsive organisation with people at the centre.

Weston College's SEND learner retention increased from 87% in 2008 to 96% in 2019, and successful completion from 75% in 2008 to 91% in 2019.

Both Colleges have invested in degree-level qualifications to develop their own highly qualified SEND support staffing profile. Weston College call their approach a Motivational



**Weston College's inclusive model**

<sup>2</sup> Statistics provided by Weston College, 7/3/2020

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Career Structure. This model supports the recruitment, retention and elevation of its specialist practitioner staff through a degree-led apprenticeship model. Intrinsic to this model is the ability to work across the college and with external agencies collaboratively. Professional development of both SEND practitioners and teaching staff includes recognising the signposts of mental ill health and learning difficulties and working within community systems.

Both Colleges ensure that highly trained SEN practitioners are available throughout the College to support learners with SEN as well as to support teaching staff to adapt and differentiate learning activities and provide for individual learner needs. Leeds City College deploys their Teaching Assistants (TA) into all classes at the commencement of each group. It is the TA's task to observe all learners over the first few weeks, assess the needs exhibited in the group, look for signs of learning difficulties requiring specific assessment and attention, observe any mental health issues, and ensure that all learners are actually in the right program. Throughout these weeks, the TAs develop relationships with all learners.

If an individual learner needs formal assessment, the learner is referred to the College's trained SEN assessors. This is handled sensitively as adults can be reticent about declaring that they have a special need and can be worried about disclosure. This assessment event looks for patterns and tendencies related to learning capability and capacity. The positive nature of SEN support is emphasised throughout the process. The key message is that anything communicated through these sessions has the primary aim of supporting 'you' to succeed. If further assessment is needed by specialised clinicians, this service is readily available through a centralised high needs team in the district.

Dr Paul is one of three further education college leaders who are actively promoting and championing the concept that authentic inclusion must be led from the top of the organisation. Through the project Putting SEND at the Centre of the Further Education and Skills System, three Centres for Excellence have been established for the benefit of the wider further education sector. Weston College is the Centre for Excellence in SEND: People; Derbyshire College Group is Centre for Excellence in SEND: Curriculum; City College Norwich is Centre for Excellence in SEND: Community.

The project is an element of The Centres for Excellence in Special Educational needs and Disabilities (SEND) (CfES) program, which is delivered through the UK's Education and Training Foundation. This initiative underpins the professional development of further education college staff through various collegiate professional and organisational development opportunities and provides ready access to SEND tools and resources.

Through the CfES program, the Foundation provides free events and in-house webinars accessible by further education staff around the UK. The exhibition site provides a plethora of information from news, videos, career opportunities, policy developments through to events and communities of practice, <https://send.excellencegateway.org.uk/>.

The Education and Training Foundation and the approach being used to develop the skills of the UK's further education workforce so they can be genuinely responsive to SEN learners is summed up in these three key principles that sit at its heart.

- The first is that we exist for the benefit of learners, something we achieve by improving the professional practice of teachers and leaders in the sector.
- The second is that we exist as a means to an end, not an end in itself. We have no shareholders and make no profit. Everything we do is about helping our fantastic sector unlock the talents and potential of our learners and improving productivity, employability, skills and educational attainment.
- And the third is that we exist to support professionals to be even better than they already are, identifying excellence and seeking to understand and disseminate it through collaborative practice. Although our work focuses on FE and Training, we bring in expert challenge and support from outside the sector. ■

## DOING APPLIED RESEARCH IN TAFES – AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE

Intended to support the growing number of TAFE staff engaging in applied research, the Victorian TAFE Association prepared this introductory guide. Available free through the VTA website, this guide synthesises a huge amount of information about research design, methodologies, techniques and standards into a roadmap that contains eight distinctive and overlapping features of applied research.



Download a copy from here:  
[vta.vic.edu.au/research-directory/doing-applied-research-in-tafes-an-introductory-guide](http://vta.vic.edu.au/research-directory/doing-applied-research-in-tafes-an-introductory-guide)

## LH MARTIN INSTITUTE CONFERENCE

LH Martin Institute Conferences explore current and emerging issues faced by the tertiary education sector, and champion innovation and communities of collaborative practice between industry, government and tertiary education providers.

In lieu of a face-to-face conference, this year LH Martin will host an October WebFest – five webinars exploring the main theme of Crisis, responsibility and opportunity: Educational leadership during major change.

Find out more at [melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute/conference/2020](http://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute/conference/2020)

## ‘Can’t be bothered’ – a conversational piece by an emerging researcher

Regina Bishop

The phrase ‘can’t be bothered’ is sometimes just par for the course in the VCAL classroom. Motivating adolescent learners to stretch beyond their comfort zone to embrace new experiences and knowledges can be, well, de-motivating for teachers. It’s difficult to know how to get the best out every student so they can be bothered.

So, the opportunity to do some real research into the ‘what and how’ to encourage young students to develop essential workplace skills was enticing but maybe, outside my capabilities as a TAFE teacher. However, if you’ve ever had young students you may appreciate that your practice can rub up against those who just aren’t ready for the demands, self-management and routine of the classroom, let alone work.

My research interest is on how we teach the skills young people need to ‘future-proof’ them in preparation for the shifting sands of work today. I was fortunate a few years ago to attend a lunch where a prominent business leader was asked for her take on this, and she replied simply ‘education.’ Back to square one.

The challenge as an emerging researcher then is to frame my experiences, observations and assumptions into an answerable question; to find the gap in the literature which can be answered; a question which has real application in our classrooms, where we can apply strategies that have demonstrable outcomes. In theory, such a question can be asked, and more importantly, answered.

That said, a small victory for us as teachers in TAFE is that research is starting to enter the educational conversation. Even better, is the support offered by professional bodies. The step-by-step approach of the AVTERA webinars has been both invaluable and overwhelming. Whilst I can appreciate the theory, the application of research methods and the work around collecting and interpreting data remains a daunting prospect. And what, if after everything, it’s unanswerable?

My way forward is to remind myself of what’s at stake if I don’t do this: young people will keep walking out of classrooms at the end of the year largely unprepared for what employers expect and demand from them, let alone know how to acquire the skills and behaviours that make them employable. To many, school is just a long string of days of words on a whiteboard. Maybe – through research – I can make a difference.

Finding the inner resources to help me on this journey is my next challenge and it will require courage for difficult conversations, a broadening of persistence and a honing of my resilience. These are daunting tasks.

Today, looking over at my ever-increasing list of possibly-exciting or not-at-all-relevant research papers I’ve found, I am resisting the urge to join my charges and say “Can’t be bothered”.

*Regina Bishop is a VCAL teacher at The Gordon Institute in Geelong, Victoria.*

## Applied research – SMEs and TAFEs

A recently released report by TAFE Directors Australia (TDA), Cisco and Optus recognises that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and family businesses will need targeted and sustained support as Australia seeks to return to pre-COVID economic activity. Titled, *SMEs and TAFEs collaborating through applied research for growth*, the report argues the case for TAFEs and SMEs partnering through applied research.

The report recommends the Australian Government invests \$5 million for a 12-month period to pilot an applied research model where TAFEs partner with SMEs and family businesses to develop or enhance products and improve services and processes. Evidence for the report’s rationale is based on the Canadian experience where, for over 15 years, the Canadian Government has supported systematic applied research between businesses and public vocational colleges.

This report is part of a suite of timely and innovative public policy initiatives TDA is bringing forward for government consideration. It complements an earlier initiative, *Critical Role of Blue Tech and Digital Skills in Australia’s Economic Recovery Submission to the Australian Government*, for the Australian Government to work with industry, SMEs and TAFEs for greater national action on developing blue tech and digital skills.

For further information please contact:

SMEs and TAFEs collaborating through applied research – Astrida Upitis, Project Manager, TDA, email [aupitis@tda.edu.au](mailto:aupitis@tda.edu.au) or phone 0409 714 457

Critical role of blue tech and digital skills – Ron Jackson, Director Strategy and Tertiary Education, TDA, email [rjackson@tda.edu.au](mailto:rjackson@tda.edu.au) or phone 0418 979 031

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