FROM THE PRESIDENT

We do live in interesting times...

We are all about to enter a new phase of VET research activity. National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) have established a three-year priority program for the sector. The Productivity Commission are assembling their advice to government about our sector, and the new ministers are taking up their portfolios, splitting the focus into several new ministries with Chris Evans at our helm and with Peter Garrett (Schools) and Kim Carr (Research) of significant interest to us. What will it mean for the future of VET research? Much will be decided by the funding that is made available for the sector and for funding research over the next few years. There is also the possibility that the government might change at some point and the plans will be reassembled. However, I think we can latch onto some trends that will steer the emerging patterns in VET research.

First, there is little doubt that while we are leading the world recovery economically, there will be a need to invest this income in infrastructure and in education, to sow the seeds for social well-being in the future. There appears to be unanimous agreement that skilling Australians is a priority, to feed the resources boom and economic growth. VET is centre stage in this regard and as future social well-being and economic prosperity depends on growing our enterprises, skilling will be the engine for that growth. In terms of research, there will be a focus on how we can maximise inclusion in skill development and minimise attrition. Finding out how to engage those excluded young people who have detached from learning and working will be important. Increasingly, retaining and retraining our mature workforce to harness their knowledge will also be critical.

Productivity is a word much used lately. Government will be very interested in any findings that can be used to accelerate learning processes and reach regional learners who have been isolated from learning hubs. There is also a growing social discourse about equity, but unfortunately it often positions migrants, 457 visa holders and international students as dilemmas rather than resources. With education as our third largest export earner, and with the VET sector responsible for the majority of these students through language learning and basic skilling, it is a growing business that the sector needs to secure. Similarly, the integration of culturally and linguistically diverse groups is critical for both skilling Australia and for social inclusion. Add to this the growing vocational skill trends within schools and within higher education, and there is a wider field than ever for us to explore and research. It is a field that appears to be in the spotlight as the link between effective skilling and economic growth is clearly recognised. It may well be that forces beyond our control and influence are generating the boom – but it is clearly evident that ineffective skilling programs could curtail its national effect. We were all drawn to AVETRA by our desire to make VET better. I feel there is no better time to produce evidence of what can make VET activity better, be it face-to-face learning, managing VET within organisations, or by tweaking existing policy. I think we will be researching at a time when the government is listening and seeking advice. That is our job as researchers. This is a good time to be doing it.

**Llandis Barratt-Pugh
President, AVETRA**

Editors' welcome

This edition highlights significant achievements in early career VET research in Australia, as is our custom, as well as two snapshots of Australia VET research in international contexts undertaken by two prominent scholars in our field.

There is also an update on how to access research from the NCVER, and news about our 2011 conference during April in Melbourne. Enjoy, send us feedback or suggestions, and items for 2011!

**Stephen Crump and
Roslin Brennan-Kemmis**

Cross-national research projects: potential and challenges for researchers

Many of the issues that face the adult vocational education sector in Australia are also playing out in other countries. As researchers in this field, this situation provides us with opportunities to engage with counterparts internationally in the conduct of our professional and scientific practices. Indeed, it is one of the great privileges of being a researcher to be able to work across countries and understand cultural and situational differences associated with the issues we find to be of interest.

These experiences also provide us with a platform to reflect critically on our understandings about the provision of vocational and/or tertiary education, both within Australia and elsewhere. For instance, most countries with advanced industrial economies are seeking to improve the productivity and skilfulness of their workforces in order to sustain standards of goods and services in an increasingly competitive global economy.

Hence, the issues concerning Australian government, tertiary education system and workers about sustaining levels of skilfulness are shared with counterparts in many other countries. Yet, at the same time, it is noteworthy that different cultural, institutional and historical arrangements mean that goals and policies for, provisions of and participants in vocational and professional education are in some ways distinct across these countries. Therefore, merely advocating and attempting to enact uniform vocational education and training provisions in response to what are perceived to be the same issues are unlikely to work or be helpful.

Take apprenticeships for instance: although contemporary versions of apprenticeship that have their origins in Germany, Austria and Switzerland are seen to work quite effectively there, these provisions are unlikely to be helpful for countries that lack the kind of institutional arrangements that can make apprenticeship systems work effectively. Consequently, we need to progress carefully when proposing that approaches such as apprenticeships can be uniformly applied, regardless of historical, cultural and institutional arrangements in those countries. So, when considering how such initiatives might be enacted, it is necessary to understand the problem they

are seeking to address and the proposed solution from the particular country's perspective.

All of this is to suggest that when we, as researchers, engage in projects in other cultural settings, we need to be very mindful of not simply applying precepts, assumptions, practices and outcomes that are applicable in Australia to those countries.

Over last few years, I, along with some colleagues, have engaged in collaborative research projects with those in Scotland and Singapore, focused on older workers and how their employability can be sustained through workplace and educational support. Across these countries and many others, the ageing workforce is a key issue. Indeed, globally, Singapore has the third highest age population after South Korea and Japan, so it is an important topic in that country. Yet, what constitutes an older worker in these countries, and how they are perceived societally, by their employers and themselves, and the continuing education and training provisions available to them are distinct.

So, while there are common issues such as countries advancing the retirement or pension entitlement age, there are particular factors that shape how mature age workers are engaged in the workplaces in each of these countries, and also how the education system can best respond to their needs.

For instance, in many Singaporean workplaces there remains the legacy of age-related pay. That is, the legacy of a pay system in which the older the worker got, the more money they were paid, still exists, although it has been disbanded.

Along with the cultural value of filial piety (respect for elders) in this country, the reinforcement of worth to high levels of pay does much to explain both the standing of mature age workers in that country, but also the difficulties they face when they are retrenched or are under pressure in the workplace to demonstrate they can perform as well as younger workers who might be paid less. Hence, whereas many Australian workers found confronting the idea of being labelled an older worker because they are over 45, this meaning and its implications are

quite different for their counterparts in Singapore.

On the other hand, the studies across the three countries have generated some interesting cross-cultural commonalities. Firstly, the evidence about the capacities of older workers to continue to learn and develop across their working lives, and their strong commitment and interest in doing so is highly consistent. Also, the need to be employable for a longer time is evident across the three countries, and many workers claim to be more competent than others claim they are.

Yet, there are considerable differences in the kinds of support that are available to them in their workplaces and through the educational system. For instance, in Australia the tertiary education system is well used to addressing the needs of adults across the work-life span. However, in Singapore the entire tertiary education system (i.e. universities, polytechnics, institutes of technical education) is largely premised on meeting the needs of school leavers and the 40-something worker. The 50- or 60- something worker would be a rarity within those institutions, and would likely be alienated by the experience. Consequently, that country is building its own continuing education system to respond to this need for ongoing skill development.

As illustrated above, there is enormous potential for the extension of our research practices and capacities through engagement in projects in other countries, and with international colleagues. There is much to be learnt from collegiate interchanges through these processes. Most likely, that learning comes from engaging in and with institutions, colleagues and informants in those countries and understanding more about their circumstances and needs. The models we should avoid, as researchers, are those which are adopted by some global agencies which tried to foist solutions such as apprenticeship systems on countries such as those in the developing world in Africa and Asia, and also countries like China for whom these models are unlikely to be successful.

Stephen Billett, Griffith University, Queensland

Quality assurance in transnational vocational education programs

As a result of a 10-month collaborative project in 2009, the VTI developed a policy and procedures document in relation to quality assurance activities in transnational education (TNE). Each VTI member institute complies with the standards as required for registration as a training provider as set out in the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). The collaborative document, *Quality assurance in transnational vocational education programs* aims to demonstrate and provide an evidence guide to the fact that VTI member institutes engage in comparable quality assurance activities for their off shore or transnational education activities.

All member institutions ensure that due diligence checks are undertaken before any project is set in motion. However, after the project has been given the 'green light', the *Quality assurance in transnational vocational education programs* document seeks to demonstrate that VTI member institutions have an overall process in place to ensure the quality of the educational offering undertaken.

The steps for ensuring quality of program offerings and continuous improvement in transnational programs follow the 'life cycle' of the student and are attentive to the needs of the student at all stages.

The document sets out the key components of the VTI quality assurance processes adopted by all members for ensuring a consistency of approach to quality assurance in transnational programs across all member TAFE institutes.

The document has a detailed table, which highlights the standard means of providing evidence of Quality Assurance currently used by member institutes. It also notes suggestions for best practice that all member institutes are striving to attain under six key headings:

1 Legal and governance

2 Resources

3 Marketing

4 Enrolment

5 Learning and Assessment Strategies

6 Evaluation and process improvement

The document notes complexities around notions of equivalence when applied to activities in overseas countries where local laws, infrastructure and capacity may not be at the same level as Australia. It also notes the attendant difficulty of managing programs for overseas students which must still comply with local Australian requirements (for example local building codes are taught). Nevertheless, all VTI members ensure, before they agree to go ahead with any programs, that student learning and outcomes overseas with partners are equivalent to what students would achieve if they were in Australia; this means activities are compliant with all aspects of the AQTF.

Victorian member TAFEs, which have participated in the development of the procedures outlined in *Quality assurance in transnational vocational education programs* are:

- Box Hill Institute of TAFE
- Bendigo Regional Institue of TAFE
- Chisholm Institute of TAFE
- East Gippsland Institute of TAFE
- Gordon Institute of TAFE
- Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE
- Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE
- Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE
- RMIT University TAFE Division
- South West Institute of TAFE
- Sunraysia Institute of TAFE
- Swinburne University
- University of Ballarat TAFE Division
- Victoria University, International Branch
- William Angliss Institute of TAFE
- Wodonga Institute of TAFE

K. Dempsey, Executive Officer, Victorian TAFE International

Current trends in adult learning incorporating critical reflective practices – MEd report

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to establish how teachers use reflective processes in their teaching practice. This required addressing the current trends of two key features in adult learning: the ability to critically reflect on experience, and incorporating the knowledge gained by that reflective learning process into quality teaching practices. To test the hypothesis, three teacher trainers from the IT&D Training unit, Hunter TAFE (NSW), completed a questionnaire to determine what strategies they currently use in their workplace. Student teachers were not used in this survey. The questionnaire was designed to determine if the teachers had an understanding of the potential value of critical reflection on their way to achieving quality outcomes.

Quality teaching and self-analysis are the keys to dynamic and beneficial development to learning. Previous research has identified characteristics of quality teaching with some indicators more easily measured than others. In a similar way, strategies of self-analysis can be determined, organised as a hierarchical and continuous process and if followed, can result in self-development. Quality teaching and self-analysis are seen as the key to dynamic and beneficial development in learners.

The analysis of the data concluded that all of the participants in the research expressed willingness, if not a degree of apprehension, to get involved and a definite interest in the belief of implementing the concept of critical practices into their teaching.

Peter Frost, Hunter TAFE, NSW

Conference 2011

The 2011 Conference theme is *Research in VET: Janus – Reflecting Back, Projecting Forward*. AVETRA's 14th Annual Conference will be held at the Rendezvous Hotel Melbourne, Victoria, from Thursday 28 – Friday 29 April 2010 (Welcome Reception on Wednesday, 27th April). We look forward to seeing you at the 2011 Conference.
To find out more, go to **avetra.org.au/annual-conference** or email **avetra@conferenceaction.com.au**

Transformative learning in the context of Australian vocational education and training – PhD thesis

Abstract

Transformative learning refers to a process of deep change in learners from which they emerge with a new perspective on the world and themselves. An influential attempt to theorise this kind of learning has been made by Mezirow, whose work has helped to shape a program of research that has studied transformative learning in a number of settings. However, few attempts have been made to research transformative learning in the context of vocational education and training (VET), and none in Australian VET. This research, therefore, was designed to explore transformative learning in this context.

The goal of exploring transformative learning in the context of Australian VET was articulated in two complementary questions: how does Australian VET foster transformative learning; and how does transformative learning contribute to the VET goal of vocational preparation? A mixed-methods multiple-case design was used to shed light on these questions. Ten groups of learners enrolled in VET programs were surveyed to identify possible examples of transformative learning. The results of the survey were then used to select two groups: one as a case of high levels of transformative learning, and the other as a case of lower levels. A qualitative phase of the project followed, involving interviews with learners from each case group to address the first question concerning how transformative learning was fostered in the program context. Interviews with trainers were conducted to investigate these factors from another angle. Transcripts from interviews with specialists in the occupational field related to the case group programs, and from the learner and trainer interviews, were analysed to address the second question of how transformative learning contributes to vocational preparation.

The case with higher levels of transformative learning was a group learning to be youth workers, while the contrasting case was a group of motorcycle technology apprentices.

Triggers for transformative learning in the youth work group included confronting program content, while youth work

trainers were found to actively seek learner change and evolved a practice to promote it. Information from youth work occupational specialists suggested that some of the transformative learning in the youth work group constituted a process of deep alignment with youth work vocational perspectives. The motorcycle technology apprentices experienced less challenge in their program, and their trainers tended to practise a more traditional approach to training focussed on skill acquisition. Motorcycle industry occupational specialists revealed that, although there are vocational perspectives in their field as well, the majority of beginning apprentices are already aligned to these perspectives through contact with motorcycle culture in their early years.

A number of implications of this research for transformative learning theory and Australian VET were drawn. First, Mezirow's concept of meaning perspectives may be a useful way to analyse occupational knowledge; second, meaning perspectives can be more contextual than Mezirow allowed; third, some transformative learning in the VET context can be understood as a process of alignment with vocational perspectives; and fourth, the practice of youth work trainers, and potentially trainers in other human service fields, can be enriched through an awareness of the theory and practice of transformative learning.

Steven Hodge
Deakin University, Victoria

Research

NCVER conducts and manages research into Australia's VET sector: See **www.ncver.edu.au/research/index.html**

How to access research

Published research

www.ncver.edu.au/publications/search.html

NCVER's online catalogue offers access to our extensive list of published resources. All published work can be downloaded free of charge and selected work can be purchased in hard copy.

Research in progress

www.ncver.edu.au/workinprogress/project_search.html

Access information about research in progress, including in-house and managed research.

VOCED research database

www.voced.edu.au

VOCED is an international online research database for technical and vocational education and training. It contains over 39,000 high-quality abstracts, many with links to full-text publications.

Special research topics

Adult literacy

www.adultliteracyresource.edu.au

This resource brings together the key research messages from NCVER's Adult Literacy Research Program.

Indigenous people

www.indigenousvet.edu.au

This resource includes all NCVER published work about Indigenous people's participation in and outcomes from VET.

People with a disability

www.disabilityandvet.edu.au

A resource that brings together all NCVER published work about the engagement of people with a disability in VET and their outcomes.

Young people

www.lsay.edu.au

The website of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) brings together all the research from a national program tracking over 35,000 young people from their mid-teens to their mid-20s as they move from school to post-school destinations.

VET in an International Context

My most recent international collaboration has been with the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL), an entity within the Singapore Workforce Development Authority (WDA). The IAL is predominantly a training institute, but it been striving to graft a research culture. One of the ways to accelerate this has been to offer three-month Visiting Research Fellowships to 'foreigners' to undertake a research project and to research capacity-build. I was working closely with, and mentoring, two research officers and, at different times, two interns from tertiary institutions undertaking placements there. In addition, I gave a number of presentations on research to audiences from both inside and outside IAL.

Research

Information for researchers

Grants for researchers

www.ncver.edu.au/research/funding.html

The National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program commissions research on a competitive basis, with funding rounds advertised at least once a year.

Research help

www.ncver.edu.au/research/information.html

Help is available for researchers who are undertaking research funded through the NVETRE Program. This includes an author's guide and information about quality assurance.

Research development

www.ncver.edu.au/research/opportunities.html

NCVER offers a range of programs designed to build researcher capacity in VET.

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What were the challenges I faced in international research collaboration? What effects did an Australian and two Filipinos (my two research officers) carrying out research within a Chinese, Indian and Malay population have on the research processes and results? What impact was there on response rates, when data collection, because of delays, ended up in the month of Ramadan? To what extent might potential participants from other providers than IAL have shied away because we were from an entity under the auspices of the WDA, the key policy-making and funding body in Singapore, or because they perceived (incorrectly) our project to be evaluating their programs? How can one interview properly, and transcribers listen clearly and accurately to tapes, when there are few quiet spaces, when interviews had to be conducted in coffee shops, on worksites and on park benches? What could I, as principal researcher, reasonably expect with regard to the type and amount of research workloads of the research officers and interns (who were concurrently working on other projects)? How would we best, cross-culturally, work together and understand each other? How was I to reconcile different ethical norms and practices in recruiting research participants, especially with respect to the role of incentives?

These were indeed weighty challenges, ones with which I enjoyed grappling, though continually very conscious that three months was too short a period to capacity-build. I have just returned, and am now in the process of writing up – albeit separated by a few thousand kilometres. So another question currently teases me: how can we best continue collaborating over distance, especially when those principal researchers still *in situ* have the high ground in commandeering the research officers' time and focus?

I found the experience very worthwhile and uplifting. There is definitely something liberating for the soul to be uprooted from the familiar ruts, routines and ruminations of one's everyday existence and to be transported into a new setting. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Roger Harris
University of South Australia

TAFE teachers evaluate their working lives

Since beginning in 1974, TAFE in Australia has experienced significant changes due to government policies of VET reform. TAFE teachers are now part of a national VET system and responsible for the delivery of national training packages and the AQTF. Seemingly, the Australian government has underlined the value of a constructivist learning theory by actively seeking to embed this theory through initiatives originally implemented by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). These include a major pedagogical change to a student-centred approach that allows multiple perspectives and stresses the importance of collaboration. On the abolition of ANTA in 2004, its former roles were absorbed by the Federal Government Department of Education, Science and Training and later by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

The aim of this qualitative study was to learn how TAFE teachers felt about professional development activities and examine their perceptions of change in their working lives. The description of their life in their educational environment added a cultural dimension not readily available through the application of quantitative or experimental methods.

The research questions sought certain dimensions of their lives as TAFE teachers: teaching practice; history; perceptions of changes; and factors influencing their professional development. The data revealed two pictures. The TAFE teachers are dedicated to their students and have positive feelings for their teaching but feel disappointed with the role of management, their workplace, and the changing nature of teaching. Further, the teachers are aligned in their perception that professional development is vital to their professional and personal development and student's outcomes and they share an intention to continue to initiate, fund and fulfil their own professional needs. It is anticipated that findings will contribute to understanding TAFE teachers' experiences and inform policy development for the VET sector and future programs, practice and student learning. This will be significant for a wide range of groups and individuals involved with vocational education and training.

Dr Patricia Bradley
Charles Sturt University

Australians researching VET internationally

International collaborations in research have become increasingly important over the last five years. In VET, these collaborations have allowed Australian researchers and their partners to juxtapose their thinking, their analysis and their research beside the experiences of colleagues in other national contexts. Since 2006, I have been working closely with colleagues from Universities in Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Netherlands. In 2008 and 2009, Australian researchers from Charles Sturt University and Swedish researchers from the University of Gothenburg and the University of Stockholm began projects that initially focussed on VET pedagogy.

These studies aimed to identify the elements of VET pedagogy in the two countries within a policy framework of increasing regulation and specification in relation to 'competencies' and the consequent work of teachers. Both countries have reinforced the discourses on qualifications, skills and outcomes to the exclusion of other dimensions of learning, and to the exclusion of significant elements of pedagogy.

This partnership and collaboration is currently exploring new forms of VET in Sweden and Australia. The restructuring of VET has lead to the reshaping of the conditions under which students learn, and teachers teach. The discourses of 'knowledge' and 'skills' have been recast in increasingly specialised ways.

The work reported on here forms one part of several cooperative projects. It is part of a larger empirical research program conducted within the 'Pedagogy, Education and Praxis' international collaboration in the Research in Professional Practice, Learning and Education Institute (RIPPLE). Others are empirical projects funded by the Swedish Research Council, the Erasmus programme of the EU and the Universities of Gothenburg and Stockholm, Sweden.

The collaboration provides the chance to explore the shaping of new forms of VET in both countries. In particular:

1 VET teachers' views on their teaching and VET pedagogy;

2 the effects of more stringent eligibility requirements in VET programs;

3 standardisation as a restructuring technology in adult education;

4 the integration of workplaces and schools in VET; and

5 the changing status of mathematics in Swedish VET programs.

The researchers from Australia and Sweden will meet in Wagga Wagga in December this year. In preparation for this meeting, the researchers have written collaboratively on the particular issues they have researched (above) and circulated papers among the group. These papers will form the basis for further writing and discussion to be done during this time. The pieces of research are complementary, overlapping, different and interesting. They will provide answers to questions that occupy minds internationally.

Associate Professor Ros Brennan Kemmis (CSU) and Christine Engström (Gothenburg) are concerned with VET teachers' views on their teaching and VET pedagogy. Their work explores the questions of how VET teachers describe their pedagogy and how these answers inform VET teacher preparation. These questions are both current and controversial in Sweden and Australia. Both countries are focussing on developing the capacities of the VET practitioner and the types and adequacy of qualifications available in these two countries.

Dr Ingrid Henning Loeb (Gothenburg) and Dr Ingrid Berglund (Stockholm) are researching Restructuring Swedish VET: A new qualified VET student in the making.

In 2011, Swedish VET in secondary schools will be facing major changes regarding student entrances and exits: there will be stricter eligibility requirements to VET programs – including apprentice programs – and reinforced discourses on qualifications, skills and outcomes. They have studied the discourse of 'knowledge' and 'skills' and analysed the concepts of theory and practice embedded in the shaping of the new VET.

Dr Gun Britt Wärvik has been working on the topic of VET teachers and restructuring of Swedish adult education between market-orientation and student-orientation. The aim of this research is to analyse standardisation as a restructuring technology, developed by one of the larger providers of adult education to meet the new political demands, and consequent implications for the VET teachers. Here, standardisation refers to quality demands from management, from formal education system, but also, to a lesser extent, from trade organisations.

Dr Ingemar Andersson (University of Gothenburg) has been researching 'Mentorship in workplace learning and the issue of integration of school-based learning and workplace learning in the field of vocational education'. A crucial question concerning this arrangement is the nature, organisation and quality of the integration between the school and the workplace. The competence of the workplace mentor and his or her cooperation with the representatives from the vocational school are crucial for the level of learning being achieved at the workplace.

This has been the focus of a project financed by the European Union in which the University of Gothenborg has participated.

Dr Lisbeth Lindber (Gothenburg) has focussed on Mathematics in VET programmes in Sweden. Her research has focussed on the status of mathematics in Swedish VET programs in upper secondary education. Policy and ideas of what kind of content students in vocational programs are to learn have differed over the years, and there have been different 'owners' of mathematics in the vocational education, 'owners' in the sense of policymakers, trade unions, writers of the syllabus, text book authors and educators.

The research projects mentioned above have been the lynch pins for the continuing collaboration. The 'resonances' between the issues in the two countries are stark, and the cross-cultural and cross-border investigations, discussions and writing contribute to policy debates, teacher practice and student learning, and the growth of the theoretical base that underpins VET.

Associate Professor Roslin Brennan Kemmis, Faculty of Education, Charles Sturt University, NSW