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FROM THE PRESIDENT

It is a real privilege and pleasure to be nominated as President of AVETRA. Having spent over 30 years working in Vocational Education and Training I know how critically important research is for informing practice and developing policy and strategy. I must pay tribute to all those involved in AVETRA, both Executive and Members, who have given us this fine platform. It is always difficult to single people out. A number come to my mind who have been tirelessly organising conferences and practitioner events, editing publications and generally doing the hard administrative slog of keeping the show on the road. There are many more I do not know personally. But I must acknowledge my predecessor, Ruth Wallace, for her work. I would also like to note the passing of one of my former bosses, Dr Gregor Ramsey who died recently. Gregor's work covered all education sectors In Australia, but he will be remembered in the VET community as the Managing Director of TAFE NSW who 'invented' Institutes. TAFE institutes until recently were the dominant organisation structure for Australian TAFE systems. They were big enough to have critical mass but small enough to be agile and flexible and thus service regional education and training needs. Gregor was also a seminal figure in the formation of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and a proponent of ANTA's Research Advisory Committee (ANTARAC) which was one of the precursors of AVETRA.

As always, this edition of 'Research Today' contains some fascinating articles. Cain Polidano, Justin van de Van and Sarah Voitchovsky have been researching the impact of 'entitlement' models. The recent VET Fee-Help scandals and the issues with 'user choice' in Traineeships fifteen years ago may not have given these demand-side allocation models a good reputation. But though there might have been issues with poor regulation and unethical practice by some providers, these researchers have found that in the Victorian example they looked at there, 'were improvements in the match between course choice and both measures of skill demand throughout the student population, including for those from disadvantaged backgrounds'. So this research is a reminder for us to keep the total picture in mind. Phil Loveder of the NCVER canvasses issues around 'Return on Investment or ROI' for VET, an issue dear to the hearts of policy makers, funders and Governments. He presents an analytical framework that 'provides a small step to better understanding the types of measures and indicators that might be considered for ROI'.

Those familiar with Dr Don Perlgut, the CEO of Community Colleges Australia, know he is a tireless advocate for his sector. In his paper he looks at the capacity of these 'not for profit' providers to contribute to regional development. He reports on research that canvasses their core strengths and some of the barriers that inhibit them. Young people 'not in education, employment or training' or NEETs, as Cameron Forrest of the NCVER tells us in his paper is a key indicator of youth engagement. Regrettably the acronym NEET reminds me of another mnemonic used in the English School system about disengaged youth – Rhino or Really Here in Name Only. Cameron gives us some comprehensive data on NEETs in Australia which reminds VET providers of their critical role in helping to address this issue.

Finally we have two papers that will be of particular interest to practicing VET teachers. Allyson Dutschke reports on the results of a survey and research into teacher perceptions and attitudes to student engagement. This is a critical area for VET, not least for student retention and graduation rates. The research reports on the positive attitudes of teachers and facilitators and their general willingness to 'go the extra mile' for their students. In the last paper, the indefatigable Linda Simon interviews Dr Fiona Wahr from Melbourne Polytechnic about what the institution is doing to encourage staff to do research. Of particular interest is the raising of the issues of the differences and similarities of VET to Higher Education.

I look forward to reading future research and AVETRA supporting VET researchers wherever they are operating. ■

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Making 'good' choices: the impact of entitlement models on upskilling later in life

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Sarah Voitchovsky, Graduate Institute, Geneva

The last half century has seen a sustained re-balancing of OECD labour markets towards increasingly high-skill occupations to meet the needs of a knowledge-based economy. In response, government policies have focussed on upskilling the workforce by improving access to vocational education and training (VET) throughout a life-course (e.g. Field 2000, OECD 2007). From a public policy perspective, a key challenge in countries such as Australia, United States and New Zealand, where VET funding is typically not linked to employment (apprenticeships), is how to allocate extra public funding for mature-age training in a way that ensures that it is responsive to prevailing labour market needs. In this study, we address this issue by examining the impacts of a unique policy experiment in Victoria between January 2011 and June 2012, known as the Victorian Training Guarantee (VTG), which replaced a centralised VET funding model with an entitlement model where funding was uncapped and linked to student choice, including with private providers. Unlike mature-age entitlement models introduced in other states, there were little restrictions on course choice, except that enrolments should be at higher than existing qualification levels.

This research is important because the potential of entitlement models to improve responsiveness of public funding to prevailing skill needs is based on two untested premises. The first is that mature-age people are motivated to enrol by the labour market returns from study (for example, in the form of higher expected wages or employment), are well-informed about the course labour market returns and will enrol in courses with high returns, an indicator of the value of the skills produced to the labour market. The second is that centralised VET funding models are not as responsive to skill needs because they are influenced by private advocacy and/or political priorities.

We test these premises by estimating the impacts of the VTG on the alignment of course choices with two measures of prevailing skill demand — proportion of enrolments in courses that prepare students for jobs on national skill shortage lists and course graduate earnings, adjusted for differences in characteristics of graduates across courses. Adjusted courses graduate earnings measured the labour market value of skills attained in training. We measure changes in these indicators before and after the full implementation of the VTG in Victoria for those 25-54, compared to those in the rest of Australia (Difference-in-differences estimation). Indicators are derived by linking individual enrolment data from the national VET Provider Collection (VETPC) with skill demand information from the national skill shortage lists and Student Outcome Survey (SOS).

Widespread increases in participation

We estimate that the introduction of the Victorian entitlement increased the rate of VET participation among 25 to 54-year-olds by 4.2 percentage points. This represents a two-thirds increase, relative to the 6.3% participation rate reported in 2008 for this age group. A disaggregated analysis indicates that the increase in participation was distributed widely across the population, including a 36-percentage-point increase among unemployed people, a 12-percentage-point increase among people with disabilities and a 13-percentage-point increase among people with only low-level (certificate I and II) VET qualifications. However, we stress that these effects may overestimate the true enrolment effects because for the period the study was undertaken, the VETPC did not account for private fee-for-service enrolments, which are likely to have decreased under the Victorian entitlement. From 2014 the VETPC commenced collecting fee-for-service activity from private providers, in addition to government-funded training activity previously collected, thus providing Total VET Activity of the Australian training market.

Improved alignment of funding with skill needs, including for disadvantaged groups

Overall, the greater freedom of choice afforded by the VTG is estimated to change the course choice mix in a way that increased the proportion of enrolments in skill shortage areas by four percentage points (a 50% increase, relative to 2008 figures), and increase expected course graduate earnings by 2.4%.

Importantly, we find improvements in the match between course choice and both measures of skill demand throughout the student population, including for those from disadvantaged backgrounds — unemployed, non-English speaking backgrounds, people with disability, those without any post-school qualifications and students living in low socio-economic status areas. These results are consistent with results from a previous National Vocational Education and Training Research (NVETR) study on the impacts of the VTG for those 15-19 year-olds (Leung et al. 2014).

Evidence that entitlement models can improve the responsiveness of VET funding to skill needs compared to centralised funding models, underlines the primacy of individual labour markets returns in course choice. We note though that our study is only able to examine short-term impacts. There is a risk that people may systematically over-respond to skill demand signals, leading to graduate oversupply in areas where there are few supply-side barriers to entry. Governments can play a role here by compiling year-on-year information on course enrolments, course graduate outcomes and long-term skill projections, which can complement course and job information available on the MySkills website. ■

Full report available at: www.ncver.edu.au/publications/publications/all-publications/making-good-choices-the-impact-of-entitlement-models-on-up-skilling-later-in-life

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Understanding the return on investment in VET for multiple stakeholders

Phil Loveder, National Centre for Vocational Education Research

Vocational Education and Training (VET) at home and abroad is often touted as making significant contributions to the development of equitable, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies. In a world of competing demands, however, its ability to make these contributions is challenged by access to adequate funding and financing. There is also an increasing expectation for VET to provide evidence for the return on investment (ROI) in VET for multiple stakeholders.

When we use the term Return on investment or ROI we are referring to a measure of the benefit of an investment relative to the cost of that investment. In the VET context, ROI is about the benefits derived by individuals, firms and nations from investing in training (VET Glossary 2016). A related term, Return to education, refers to the individual gain from investing in more education, and is especially focussed on the relationship between educational attainment and earnings.

This article reports on the results of an international project between NCVER and the UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre in Germany focussed on how to better understand the costs and benefits from VET to multiple stakeholders. A key objective was also to develop a broad analytical framework for the collection of ROI information from multiple perspectives (see figure 1 derived from Schueler and Loveder, 2018 forthcoming).

Benefits relative to investments

An ROI analysis can fulfil a range of purposes. ROI is useful for public policy makers in VET to gather knowledge on the economic and social value of VET investments and to evaluate policies for public-funded institutions. It can provide governments and funding agencies with the analytical information and intelligence required for understanding and evaluating the performance of the VET system, providing intelligence for making decisions about where to place further public investments in training, justifying the level of expenditure that have been made or making a compelling case for further investment. It can also be used at the enterprise level as a practical tool for corporate strategic planning, and promoting business improvement and efficiency. At the individual level it can help guide students to make choices about careers, training and further studies, and earning potential.

Examination of international research provides some evidence of the positive outcomes from investment in VET (for example, Brown et al, 2015, CEDEFOP, 2011, CEDEFOP, 2013, Griffin, 2016). The key types of ROI for individuals are related to employment, productivity and higher wages. Attainment of employability skills and improved labour force status are also highly valued. Indicators that are not job-related focus on well-being such as self-esteem and confidence, foundation skill gains, along with social inclusion and improved socio-economic status.

The key types of ROI for employers arising from VET are employee productivity, business profitability, improvements in the quality of products and services and business innovation. Because businesses are perceived to operate like small communities there are also social and environmental benefits. Employee well-being, employee engagement (which reduces absenteeism and staff turnover), a safe workplace and environmental sustainability practices are key non-market indicators of business returns.

Economic growth is a key ROI benefit for the economy. This relates to labour market participation, reduced unemployment rates and the development of a more skilled workforce. Returns of investment in VET bring other benefits to society, including improved health, social

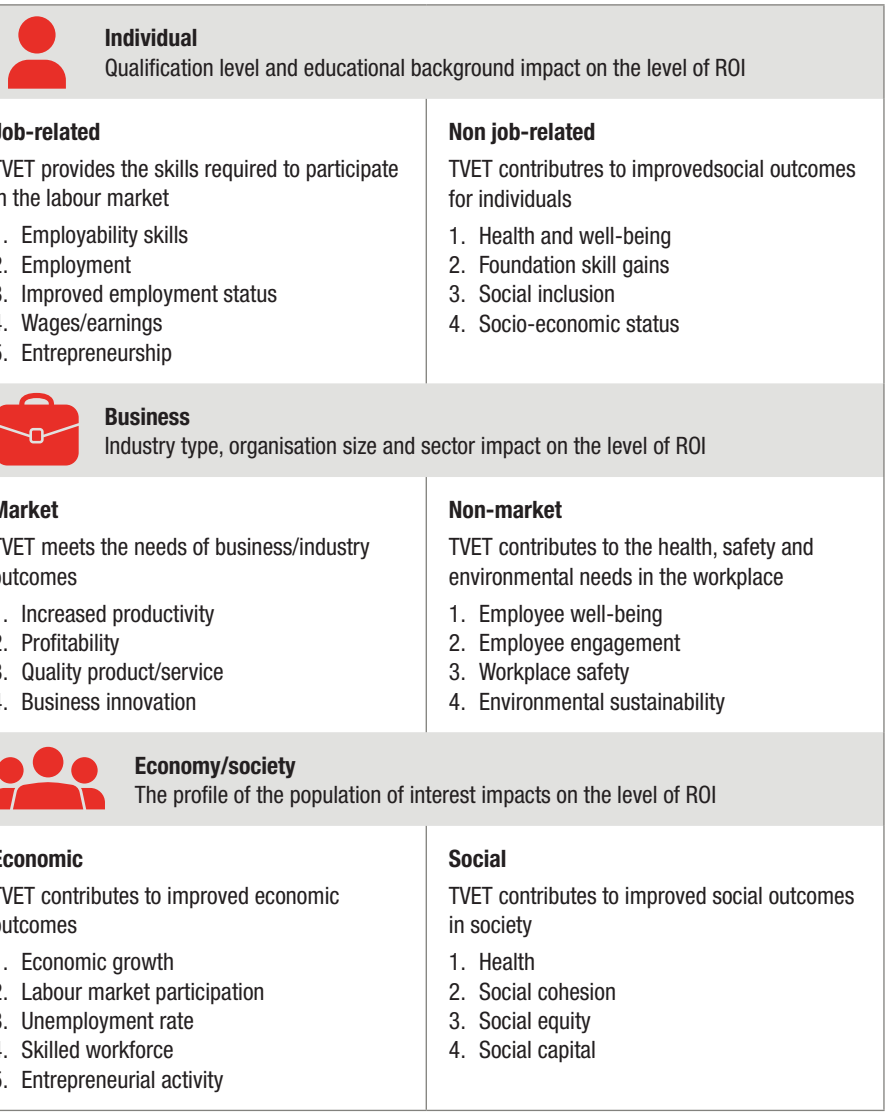

Figure 1: High-level analytical framework

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cohesion (increased democratisation and human rights), improved social equity (particularly for disadvantaged groups) and strengthened social capital.

Developing an analytical framework for ROI in VET

A comprehensive review of the international literature on ROI from VET (TVET is the comparable term used by many countries overseas) has informed the development of our analytical framework. It takes into consideration the benefits for the individual, the business, the economy and society. Here we present the key aspects of the framework as it relates to these three groups.

Additional categories, related to environmental sustainability are also considered. The framework also provides specific indicators, measures and estimation methods.

In developing this framework for ROI we have found that the diversity of VET systems and the differing contexts of the countries in which they operate pose considerable difficulties for cross-country comparisons. A challenge is to develop standardised measures and indicators and reliable and appropriate data to enable such international comparisons to be made.

The analytical framework presented in this paper provides a small step to better understanding the types of measures and indicators that might be considered for ROI. Planning for the collection of information and data which aid in the understanding of consumer and public investment returns should be considered as part of any public policy debate. ■

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The role of community education providers in regional and rural New South Wales: Contributing to economic development

Don Perlgut, PhD
CEO, Community Colleges Australia

Proper economic development in non-metropolitan NSW requires the coordinated and collaborative effort of numerous stakeholders and players, all working closely together. This paper discusses the capacity of New South Wales community education providers to contribute to regional and rural economic development. It is based on recent research undertaken and published by Community Colleges Australia (CCA).[1]

There are powerful reasons for focussing on the contributions that not-for-profit community education providers make to advancing the development of local communities. These providers are heavily represented in delivering vocational education and training (VET) outside of metropolitan areas.[2] Unconstrained by large bureaucracies, these small and medium-sized organisations are unencumbered by the need to produce profit for owners or investors, resulting in a low risk to governments. They are experienced in working collaboratively with the state and Commonwealth governments in achieving education, training and employment goals, and frequently work with other government agencies responsible for social and community services, as well as with business, industry and community stakeholders.

The Australian Parliament's Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation has concluded that, a 'place-based' approach to regional economic development is important because it recognises that regions are different, that one-size-fits-all approaches are often inappropriate, and that local communities must be central to development efforts.'[3]

Regional and rural NSW community education providers contribute extensively to their communities. For example, the approximate combined annual income of the 26 NSW community education providers in 2016-17 was $70 million; they employed more than 1,500 staff as well as numerous part-time trainers.[4]

In recent years there has been a rationalisation of the NSW adult and

1 See https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/NSW-Regional-and-Rural-Community-Providers-Regional-Econ-Devt-report-FINAL-25Jan2018-2.pdf and https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/The-Role-of-Community-Education-in-Regional-and-Rural-Economic-Development-7February2017.pdf.

2 See https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/NSW-Community-Colleges-Govt-Funded-VET-2016-Analysis-28September2017-1.pdf.

3 Parliament of Australia, Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation, 2017, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Regional_Development_and_Decentralisation/RDD/Issues_Paper/section?id=committees%2Freportrep%2F024094%2F24934.

4 See https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/NSW-Regional-and-Rural-Community-Providers-Regional-Econ-Devt-report-FINAL-25Jan2018-2.pdf.

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community education (ACE) sector; despite this reduction, the sector remains an important feature of the state's educational landscape. The Jobs for NSW's *Jobs for the Future* report places adult, community and school education amongst the state's top 20 growth industries.5 The NSW community education sector is poised to assist the state to take advantage of this growth.

The NSW Government provides support for NSW ACE providers in many ways. The Community Service Obligation (CSO) program ($18 million in 2017/18) is part of the government's Smart and Skilled initiative, and is aimed at meeting the needs of disadvantaged learners, regional and remote communities and hard to service communities. A high percentage of the students participating in these ACE CSO-funded programs live in regional and rural areas: in 2016, more than 72.4% of government-funds that went to VET for community education providers was spent outside of metropolitan Sydney.[6] Community Colleges Australia (CCA) acknowledges the importance of CSO funding for servicing the needs of the most disadvantaged residents, and believes that a substantial increase in CSO funds is warranted.

The NSW Government's $1.8 million Tech Savvy for Small Business program, implemented in 2017-18, is another program that has enormous potential to make a real difference in regional and rural economic development, as it draws on the strengths of NSW community education providers, especially their ability to work locally and with small businesses.[7] The April 2018 announcement that the NSW Government will fund TAFE NSW $30 million to provide free training to small businesses to undertake digital and financial literacy, cybersecurity and general business management indicates the popularity of this approach.[8]

5 *Jobs for the Future*, p. 32, https://www.jobsfornsw.com.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/90740/Jobs-for-the-future-full-report-August-2016.pdf.

6 See https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/NSW-Community-Colleges-Govt-Funded-VET-2016-Analysis-28September2017-1.pdf.

7 See https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Tech-Savvy-for-Small-Business-28March2018-final.pdf.

8 See media release by the NSW Department of Industry, "Free TAFE courses through NSW Government's $30m skills for business program", 6 April 2018, https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/media/media-releases/2018-media-releases/free-tafe-courses-through-nsw-governments-$30m-skills-for-business-program.

"Opportunities exist for the community education sector to extend its reach by expanding training programs for older workers who are over-represented and under-utilised in many regional locations."

The NSW Department of Industry has provided valuable support for the community education sector through the ACE Teaching and Leadership program. This program has provided opportunities for the professional development of trainers and the establishment of effective governance arrangements. Programs such as this are particularly important for regional and rural providers, because they have limited access to professional development opportunities.

Currently the regional community education sector delivers a range of valuable economic development programs in six categories.

Community education regional economic development activities fall into six categories:

- business incubators, such as those run by Business Growth Centre (Lake Macquarie) and Byron Community College;
- working with Indigenous communities, such as the ACE Community Colleges' award-winning Aboriginal drivers education program;
- workplace and business services, such as VERTO's Australian Apprenticeship Support Network, Western Riverina Community College's English in the Workplace and WEA Hunter's RTO expansion;
- employment programs and services, such as Kiama Community College's NextGEN Digital Development Program and Byron Community College's permaculture and sustainability training that has made it an important attraction for regional employers;
- health and social services, such as the Port Macquarie Community College's formation of the Mid North Coast Human Services Alliance; and
- arts and culture, such Riverina Community College's Disability Art Studio and South Coast College's Milton-Ulladulla Comedy Festival, a sustainable social enterprise.

Opportunities exist for the community education sector to extend its reach by expanding training programs for older workers who are over-represented and under-utilised in many regional locations, and collaborations with regional universities to develop and encourage the uptake of social enterprises. CCA also sees an opportunity for extending its economic development approaches in Western Sydney, where nine of its members engaged in collaborative activities.[9] There are also opportunities for the community education sector to access philanthropic funding, to complement the funds already provided by government, and diversify funding bases.

Regional and rural NSW community providers have identified key barriers that prevent their engagement in effective regional economic development initiatives. These include:

- regulatory barriers to accessing regional economic funding programs such as the Commonwealth's Building Better Regions Fund, which do not allow participation for not-for-profit educational institutions;
- an absence of funding to enable the development and implementation of pilot programs;
- the difficulty in attracting, keeping and supporting quality trainers and assessors because of distances to regional and rural centres; and
- lack of resources, facilities and infrastructure required to help organisations develop new programs and strategic capabilities and offer a greater number of services.

For these reasons, the community education sector has warmly welcomed the NSW Department of Industry's 2017/18 'thin market' funding of $100,000 to each of five outer regional and remote community colleges (Robinson College in Broken Hill, Western College in Dubbo, Western Riverina Community College in Griffith, Community College Northern Inland based in Barraba and New England Community College in Guyra).[10]

New South Wales community education providers can and do play an important role in the development of regional and rural economies, and should be provided with opportunities to expand this role. The thin market funding made available for them to do this is a necessary first step but one that should be expanded in the future. ■

9 See https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Western-Sydney-Regional-Economic-Development-statement-6April2018.pdf.

10 See https://cca.edu.au/community-colleges-australia-welcomes-nsw-government-funding-in-201718/.

Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)

Cameron Forrest, National Centre for Vocational Education and Training (NCVER)

Not being in education, employment or training (NEET) is recognised internationally as a key indicator of youth disengagement. Young people in this group are less likely to have the skills and experience necessary for a successful transition into employment or further education, and consequently are more likely to have poorer outcomes in later life. Although it is normal for young people to be NEET at some point during their transition from education into the labour market, individuals who are NEET for longer periods are at risk of longer-term disengagement and disadvantage (Brynner & Parsons 2002; Furlong 2006). Reducing the incidence and duration of NEET periods is therefore likely to provide wider economic benefits in addition to improving individual outcomes, and so is of considerable interest from a policy perspective.

Because it is quite normal for young people to be NEET for some period of time during their initial transition into the labour market (Quintini, Martin & Martin 2007), cross-sectional or 'snapshot' figures may be less useful for understanding risk factors for, and consequences of, NEET periods than longitudinal data such as those provided by the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY)[1]. In addition, the comprehensive education and employment biographies provided by LSAY allow for a holistic definition of NEET (see Figure 1). Education status, employment status, and NEET status could therefore be derived for each month of the 10-year survey period.

Due to the complexity of the analyses, findings have been reported for the Y03 and Y06 cohorts only, and data have not been weighted. For this reason, the figures reported below are not necessarily representative of the wider Australian population. At the time of the initial study, the Y06 cohort was in its eleventh year of collection, and so data were only available until wave 10 (2015). For comparability, analyses involving the Y03 cohort were restricted to this date range (i.e. 2003-2012). In this paper we draw from the analyses provided by recent NCVER researchers and provided in Stanwick, Forrest & Skujins (2017).

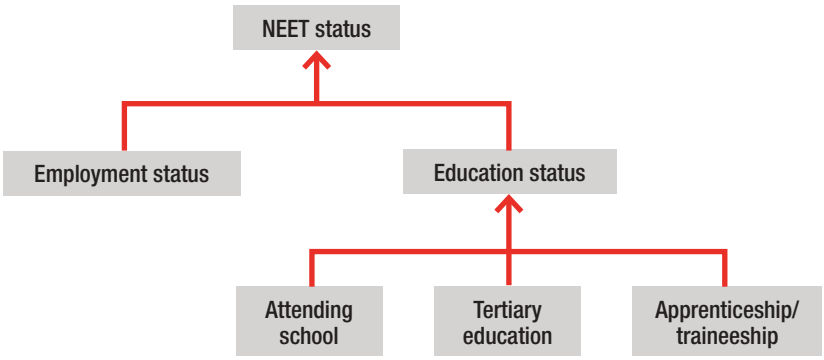

Figure 1: Factors considered in the derivation of NEET status

Size of the NEET groups

Figure 2 shows the size of the analysis groups, according to whether respondents were not known to be NEET during any given month of the survey period ('never NEET'), known to be NEET for one month or more at some stage during the survey period ('ever NEET'), or known to be NEET for a period of six or more consecutive months during the same period ('persistently NEET'). To account for attrition, these figures represent proportions of the sample who were still present in the survey at wave 10. Note that the figures do not sum to 100 per cent because the ever NEET and persistently NEET groups are not mutually exclusive.

A higher proportion of the Y06 cohort was NEET at some point during the survey period as compared with the Y03 cohort (39.2% versus 25.8%), an unexpected finding given that only three years separated the survey periods for the two cohorts. The same was also true for the persistently NEET group (17.1% versus 10.7%). As previously mentioned, due to the greater risks associated with becoming NEET during adolescence, these categories were also produced for waves 1 to 5 of the survey period, when participants were aged 15 to 19. The results are presented in Figure 3.

The increased proportions comprising the never NEET groups reflect the decreased opportunity to become NEET, given the temporal dependencies of the derivations. Nevertheless, the discrepancies between the Y03 and Y06 cohorts are more pronounced here, with 18.1% of the Y06

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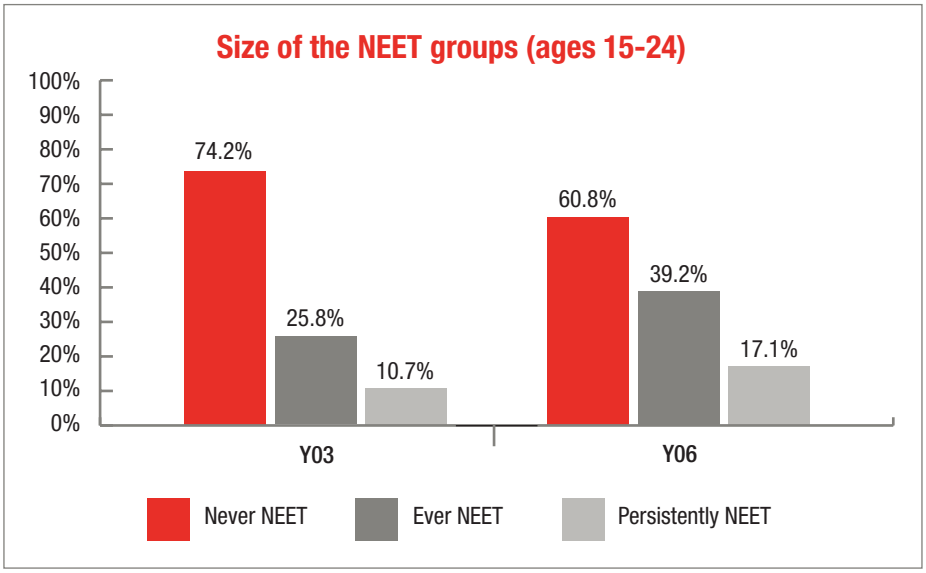

Figure 2: Size of the NEET groups in Y03 and Y06 across the full survey period

1 The Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) follows young people from the age of 15 until the age of 25 years. It provides a comprehensive data source for understanding the pathways young people take while at school and when they leave school.

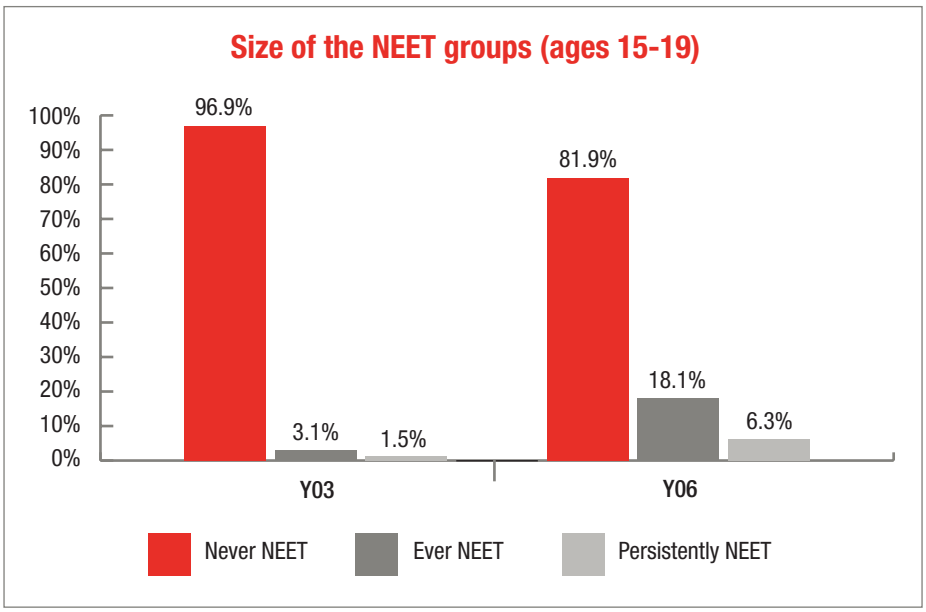

Figure 3: Size of the NEET groups in Y03 and Y06 between waves 1-5

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cohort who were still present in wave 10 experiencing some NEET period before the age of 19, compared with just 3.1% of the Y03 cohort. Although explanations for this effect are not immediately clear, it is likely that the timing of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) impacted these groups in different ways. In 2009, when the economic impact of the GFC became more pronounced in Australia, Y06 respondents were aged about 18 and beginning to transition into the labour market. Conversely, the Y03 cohort was aged about 21, and may have had an advantage in the additional three years to transition from school into employment or further education.

How long do NEET periods last?

On average, between ages 15-24 LSAY participants spent between 2.3 months (Y03) and 3.9 months (Y06) in the NEET state. However, these figures are heavily influenced by the number of respondents who were not NEET at any stage throughout that period; when restricted to individuals who were NEET at some point during the ten years, those figures rose to 9.0 months (Y03) and 9.9 months (Y06).

This effect became more pronounced when examining individuals who were persistently NEET during the survey period: for Y03, persistently NEET individuals spent an average of 17.7 months NEET, and this increased to 18.7 months for Y06 respondents. Finally, individuals who were persistently NEET between ages 15-19 spent 24.8 months (Y06) to 28.6 months (Y03) NEET, representing as much as 31.6% of all months covered by the survey period. This in particular seems to indicate a 'scarring effect', such that NEET periods in adolescence are likely to extend to, or lead to additional NEET periods, in early adulthood.

What demographic factors are associated with NEET periods?

Socio-demographic factors that were significantly associated with persistent NEET periods included, in decreasing order of significance:

- Having children (V = .13 – .31);
- Year 12 non-completion (V = .12 – .23);
- Coming from a lower socioeconomic background (V = .08 - .13);
- Coming from a provincial geographic location (V = .05 – .06);
- Female gender (Y03 only, V = .09); and
- Indigeneity (Y06 only, V = .05).

Although significant, many of these effects were small: having children and year 12 non-completion represented the most notable and consistent correlates of persistently NEET periods.

What predicts NEET periods in young adulthood?

The final analyses of the report comprised a series of regressions, predicting NEET periods from a range of demographic and social factors. To do so, the survey periods were split into two halves, reflecting ages 15-19 and ages 20-24. Outcomes between the ages 20-24 could therefore be predicted from factors measured between ages 15-19, thereby controlling for the direction of causality.

Significant predictors of persistently NEET periods between ages 20-24 are presented in Table 1. Findings are reported in terms of odds ratios (OR), which represent the relative likelihood of becoming persistently NEET. For example, an individual in the Y06 cohort who was persistently NEET between ages 15-19 was 5.39 times as likely to be persistently NEET between ages 20-24. This is again indicative of a scarring effect of NEET periods experienced during adolescence. Other predictors included socioeconomic status, year 12 non-completion, and female gender (Y03 only). By far, however, the most significant predictor was having children between ages 15-19 (OR = 4.42-7.97); that is, respondents who had children during adolescence were up to 8 times as likely to be NEET for a period of six months or more during early adulthood. This has profound implications for policy. Should childcare responsibilities be considered a 'legitimate' reason to not be in any form of employment, education, or training? Is it appropriate to include young mothers and fathers alongside individuals who choose not to work when drafting employment and welfare legislation? The diversity of circumstances among the NEET group suggests that no single intervention is likely to serve as a panacea for youth disengagement.

Table 1: Significant predictors of persistently NEET periods between ages 20-24

	Odds Ratios	
	Y03	Y06
Had children between ages 15-19	4.42	4.97
Persistently NEET period between ages 15-19	3.03	5.39
Non-completion of year 12	2.24	1.73
Lowest SES quartile (as compared with highest)	1.88	2.12
Female gender	1.89	-

Summary

These findings confirm the Australian context effects reported internationally related to the risks and consequences of NEET periods, especially the particularly high risks associated with persistent NEET periods during adolescence. Failure to complete year 12 and having children during adolescence appear to have the most profound effects on

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long-term outcomes. However, the diversity of the NEET group indicates that a range of targeted interventions may be necessary to address youth disengagement in its entirety. Furthermore, the possible effect of the GFC on NEET rates suggests that wider economic circumstances should be included alongside individual choice in policy considerations. The legitimacy of activities other than employment or education, such as childcare, must also be addressed in any future NEET discussions. ■

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Understanding VET teacher attitudes to student support

Allyson Dutschke, Community Services, Health & Lifestyle, TAFE SA

In 2016 the opportunity was provided for interested Vocational Education and Training (VET) teachers working within a large public provider, to conduct small scale research with the view to 'Enhancing (TAFE SA) Staff Capacities through Action Research'. This research paper gives an insight into the research of one of these teachers (a peer of the research subjects), and one keen to see improvement and positive change in VET policy.

In the Australian VET environment, where an entry level qualification (Certificate II, III or IV) can be completed in less than a 12-month period, the nature of the connection teachers make with their students can have a long-term effect on student success and retention. This connection may encourage students not only to complete their current studies but also to progress to higher level qualifications and in doing so build their capacity to seek greater employment opportunities.

In studies of student retention, it has been clearly identified that student interaction with faculty staff plays a key role in student decisions to stay or depart their studies (Tinto 2010, Tinto 1973, 1975 both cited in Berge & Huang, 2004).

This research sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the attitudes and practices displayed by teachers?
- To what extent do teaching staff see changing models of delivery and organisational structures as influencing their practices and relationships with students?
- How empowered do teachers feel to cultivate this environment for their students?
- Do teachers grasp the responsibility of creative learning and innovative teaching?
- Do VET teachers feel they are part of a centralised equilibrium and collaborative partnership with their students?

It focused on the provider's two largest educational schools: Community Services and Business Studies. These schools combined employ approximately 400 teaching staff. As these schools implement similar mixed models of delivery (that is, face-to -face classes, online delivery, external study, and industry work experience or placement), they provided an opportunity for investigating the different practices and attitudes displayed by teachers. Findings from the research could inform future professional development programs for all teaching staff.

Two methods for collecting this information were used: an online survey and in-person interviews. The online survey tool was used for the first stage of data collection and analysis; it enabled the efficient collection and analysis of responses. The survey collected information on the demographic characteristics of the participants, educational programs (that is, the school), location/s of delivery, qualification levels delivered, average size of classes they taught, and the type of delivery and facilitation methods used. Teachers were also asked to reflect on and to indicate their attitudes to teaching and working with students and the practices they employed. There were also opportunities for respondents to provide written comments to clarify or expand on their responses. Seven teachers provided more detailed information via interview and another five teachers did so via written response.

Findings

Responses were received from 164 teachers delivering training across all qualification levels across 33 of the 35 state-wide campuses, within both schools. In addition, responses were received from 20 teachers delivering courses via external and online facilitation, and in remote non-organisational locations, and industry-related worksites.

The predominant class size was 10-20 students. Teachers with small classes (that is, <10 students per class) were frequently located in less populated locations, while teachers with larger classes (that is, >30 students per class) were more likely to be delivering training across the main metropolitan campuses with established skills laboratories. Findings indicate a wide usage of all current modes of delivery, including on campus only, on/off campus, online study only, external study, and workplace assessment and training. Only one respondent indicated never having delivered face-to-face training.

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External study and workplace training and assessment delivery methods were less reported, mainly because they are not offered for all qualifications.

Attitudes and practices for student engagement and retention

Commitment to students

There was solid evidence of teacher commitment to helping students, reinforcing the researchers' own observations and experience of teaching staff wanting to assist students. This finding also supported Tinto's observations (Tinto, 2010,) of how 'expectations about success in the classroom are primarily influenced in formal and informal ways by faculty' (p.57), including teacher action (or inaction). Teachers indicated that they were engaged in many practices to assist student learning. These ranged from the limited roles of teaching and marking, through to the more intense roles involving high levels of commitment of time and effort required for working with students, both during and outside of regular work hours, and for taking on additional learning support roles. The value and respect that teachers had for their students was especially evident through their responses to questions about the provision of inclusive environments, individual respect, and support for individual learning needs. Each of these items received support from more than 140 teachers.

Teacher views were best summarised by the following comment: 'I'm here to support students achieve their study goals and at times this means I'll work outside usual work hours and do *other activities* to support students in being successful ... that's my job'.

Points of tension for teachers reflected similarly across both schools: challenges with administration processes, time expectations, high numbers of students, and student attitudes to learning and lack of responsibility. Many highlighted issues with organisational changes which continue to cause challenges for teachers.

It is not always possible to give effective support to ensure retention when you have a student load of 50 - 60, administration support only available at a campus 200kms away, are responsible for all validation and quality and spend at least 50% of time on administration, troubleshooting system issues and completing documentation to satisfy quality audits and systems data. In our office it is common for teachers to work up to 7 pm at night several nights a week to make sure students' needs are met and we are always taking marking home. This is not conducive to good self-care, workplace health and safety, or quality outcomes for students so we can retain them.

Positive learning environments

Interviews with teachers emphasised the importance of good relationships between the teacher and student and identified these as being a critical element in student retention and engagement. This was combined with the creation of a sense of community – whether within the walls of a face- to-face classroom, or in the virtual world of online learning. However, not all teaching was a positive experience for respondents. High student loads (sometimes up to 200 students due to continuous enrolments), short time-lines for teaching and assessment turn-around, and technical difficulties experienced in applying learning methodologies (especially the online (Moodle) platform) were some of the key challenges experienced. These challenges caused additional and unnecessary stresses for teaching staff and students, especially when combined with administrative rationalisations, and a disconnection from administration staff. Some respondents reported they had shared with their managers and teaching teams their feelings about the positive and negative impacts these challenges were having on their relationships with students. Those with positive and supportive work relationships with managers and teachers in their teams were more likely to feel supported also in developing positive and effective relationships with their students.

Going 'above and beyond'

Comments such as 'Students come first' and `I like contact with students – it energises me', is evidence of teachers from these schools putting a lot of themselves into their work with students. The mantra of 'meeting the students where they are', was often used by teachers to describe a practice that was invaluable to teaching practice. It also required teachers to have a broad experience and industry knowledge base to enable them to contextualise and accommodate industry variations and individual student learning needs into the training. The twenty-four/seven nature of online learning meant that teachers were continuously receiving notifications from the students themselves or via the online platform. When a student is experiencing distress through issues with these online learning platforms and processes many teachers feel that it is imperative for them to provide an immediate response and render assistance. The alternative is to face

"There was solid evidence of teacher commitment to helping students, reinforcing the researchers' own observations and experience of teaching staff wanting to assist students."

the additional consequences of student non-success or complaint. Nevertheless, these practices can have detrimental consequences on teachers, especially when they receive persistent calls, or when text messages from students and emails from work keep coming directly to their work or personal mobile phone.

Many teachers indicated that they were fulfilling additional administrative requirements caused by quality and audit processes, on top of their teaching and assessing role. As a consequence, many reported they were left with little time during work hours for class preparation or marking which are standard teacher roles. In the words of one interviewee this was 'working for audit – not for best educational practice'. The challenge of having enough time to fulfil the role of teacher was captured by this comment: 'I do feel now that I don't give my students the time they deserve'.

Hindrances to effective practice

Many expressed an understanding of the value and necessity for continuous improvement; however, they also countered that rather than raise levels of efficiency and student success, the raft of recent changes had hindered teacher practice and the achievement of students. Technology-related changes included the migration to the Moodle platform, greater expectations for online learning, digitalised online student management system, and single sign-on for student logins. Other hindrances were associated with funding-body changes and reporting requirements, financial processes for VET fee-help and Fees by Instalment programs, admissions and enrolment processes, and requirements for dealing with Language, Literacy and Numeracy issues.

Teachers indicated their concern for students being over-loaded upfront, and then experiencing difficulties maintaining the pace required by their learning plan. This resulted in students feeling 'stranded' or overwhelmed and losing their initial excitement for and engagement with study. Words like consistency, listening, friendly and flexibility were repeated by all interviewees, when they spoke about the practices needed for maintaining student

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engagement, skills and practices being lost due to the increased demands of the role.

Broad-ranging implications for VET

Were our research questions answered? The answer to this question is Yes for some and No for others. Have more questions been raised? The questions that have been raised have broad-ranging implications for the provider and specifically for its teachers. As the VET delivery landscape continues to change and evolve there are also wider-reaching implications for VET in Australia, VET students and VET teachers. The challenge for VET providers is in prioritising the needs of students, the appropriate support they require, and the roles best utilised to provide this support. As the most critical role in this changing environment is that of the VET teacher, the greatest risk for the system itself is in not adequately recognising the current challenges faced by teachers and how such challenges may threaten their commitment to teaching.

There is a strong tradition of public VET provision across Australia. It is aimed at providing high quality training for all students (notably, an extremely diverse group with many different demands). This system is currently facing funding pressures which in turn may reduce the ability of teachers to continue to provide very high levels of service. This research reveals that many VET teachers are going above and beyond the call of duty to do the very best for their students. But is this sustainable? And what can public providers do to support these teachers so they feel empowered to put the traditional values of VET into practice? In this environment these are the enduring questions that must be answered. ■

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INTERVIEW

Linda Simon interviews Dr Fiona Wahr, Senior Lecturer, Learning and Teaching Unit, Melbourne Polytechnic about what the institution is doing to encourage staff to do research.

Linda Simon

Dr Fiona Wahr

Linda: *On 8 December 2017, Melbourne Polytechnic held a conference, 'Getting Engaged in Learning and Teaching'. What was your focus for this conference and was research an important aspect of the conference?*

Fiona: The title of the conference says it all really; *Getting Engaged in Learning and Teaching*. The focus was to promote deeper engagement in learning and teaching across the institution. For the last two years we have invited Melbourne Polytechnic teaching staff (VET and higher education (HE)) as well as the professional staff who support student learning in other ways, to our annual conference. It is a day to come together to share, promote and celebrate our work in the areas of learning and teaching reflective practice, scholarship and research. The conference contributes to the ultimate aim for all our work; providing a learning environment where students effectively engage in their learning. Our education practitioners use the conference to share learning and teaching ideas with peers and hopefully leave better equipped, empowered and motivated to enhance their learning and teaching reflective practice by reviewing their teaching and trying new approaches to improve outcomes for students.

This focus on reflective practice might suggest research is not core to the conference, and it is true that few people present formal research. What the conference aims to do, however, is model how reflective practice can be scholarly, evidence based and well communicated, and potentially conducted as formal applied research in learning and teaching. Building on the reflective practice that is a normal part of the teacher's professional role promotes a more robust scholarly learning and teaching and research culture at Melbourne Polytechnic. A more specific goal for the conference and the preparation that goes into it then becomes the provision of opportunities which directly scaffold and strengthen this collaborative culture of scholarly learning and teaching practice improvement.

Presenting at the conference enables our educational practitioners to contribute towards this cultural goal in a number of ways. Presenters gain experience and confidence in thinking about what they are looking to achieve in their teaching, clarifying their ideas, how they know and show others what has been achieved and why it is important. Presenters include both first time presenters and more experienced scholars trying new ideas they plan to present or publish externally in the future. Either way all presenters receive validation and recognition of their good practice as well as constructive feedback from others to help build upon.

Further, the audience are exposed to scholarly practice and standards of practice and reporting, and are challenged by new ideas, get to explore areas of interest and frame or reframe their own thinking on a range of topics. In 2017 Linda Simon and Melinda Waters gave a keynote called 'Changing work, changing practices: Building scholarly activity in VET'. This was a welcome invitation to explore the issues and questions that come up in our work that we want to make better sense of; to 'scratch the itch' so to speak. The conference creates a space for networking, benchmarking, presenting possibilities and voicing challenges. We aim to spark curiosity and an 'I can do/ try that' attitude.

Holding the conference says to all staff that learning and teaching enhancement is valued, that different perspectives are respected and that we can learn from each other. So in an indirect way

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the conference promotes distributed leadership in learning and teaching, where we, through our presentations and discussions, raise questions and inform the broader learning and teaching agenda of what we believe are the important matters to be addressed at Melbourne Polytechnic.

Linda: *What program is Melbourne Polytechnic undertaking to encourage its staff to become involved in research?*

Fiona: Melbourne Polytechnic sees reflective practice, scholarship and research in learning and teaching within a 'continuum of practice' as described by Melinda, Linda and their colleagues previously*. We aim to recognise and reward all forms of professional learning and inquiry at the same time as encouraging staff to extend their practice and build a culture of evidence-based practice. Staff have always undertaken professional development demonstrating professional practice and continuous improvement in learning and teaching, and higher education staff have always undertaken research as well. We are aiming to extend this to make it more scholarly for all teaching staff; that is supporting a strong focus on evidence based learning and teaching practice and underpinning changes by what is already known about learning and further, that there are benefits in sharing this through activities like the conference.

To create this robust and dynamic exchange, we convene the conference using some specific strategies. We support presenters to feel safe to share their work and ideas and to be comfortable to 'put themselves out there'. I see the most important part of my role as a conference convenor is to create a space where presenters are confident about what they have to say and comfortable to share, and for audiences to be receptive, respectful and engaged in presentations. Presenters are offered support to prepare their presentations where we scaffold enhanced scholarly and evidence based learning and teaching capability amongst novice and more experienced researchers. Also presenters value opportunities to discuss their ideas and receiving tips and strategies about how to get started, persevere when things get tricky and present their ideas and outcomes to others. We provide advice and templates to help them unpack their ideas to demonstrate the evidence based thinking behind their practice. We have found this helps presenters to be more comfortable in using the language of research, and we are hoping the audience will also pick up on the terminology thus contributing to how we build a scholarly short hand within our learning and teaching community.

Melbourne Polytechnic also has a very active Applied Research Committee which reports to our Academic Board. At the moment, this Committee is guiding a range of policies and initiatives which promote a culture which understands and engages in research and scholarship. The project work arising from the Committee is being undertaken by collaborative teams from across the institution. This is a long-term initiative. There is agreement among Committee members that we have a range of matters to work through before we can be satisfied we have created the culture that we are aiming for – it is a work in progress and we are using a continuous improvement process to progress this work and to refine where we want this to lead.

Another side to the work is in the reflective practice space where our teacher capability building professional development programs are incorporating greater emphasis on scholarly practice using action oriented and evidence based learning and teaching projects as the basis for this work.

Linda: *Why do you see this as important for both the VET sector and for higher education staff at the Institute?*

Fiona: Principles and core practices of good learning and teaching (including the practice of scholarship of learning and teaching) apply across VET and Higher Education. Across Melbourne Polytechnic there are common considerations and approaches that all staff can relate to including the importance of working with industry, work ready graduates, 21st century skills, specific student cohorts and working in Melbourne's north. Evidence-based reflective practice in particular is core to good teaching practice and relevant for all educational practitioners; the more scholarly the better. Bringing everyone together for the conference and in other scholarly and research initiatives reinforces this point and creates opportunities to learn from each other. Our aims for learning and teaching scholarship and research deliberately exploit this diversity. Our unique circumstances of a strong community of great diversity provides a means to learn professionally. The conference is an example of this by providing a wonderful opportunity for cross discipline, sector and department learning and collaboration. We have many experienced and strong practitioners in both HE and VET. We know we can and should be learning from each other. The similarities in VET and HE learning and teaching provide a common language, strengthen a learning and teaching culture and offer immediate avenues for collaboration. The differences between and/or specifics of the two sectors provide us with new areas to explore, take meaning from and shape our future.

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Melbourne Polytechnic

Melbourne Polytechnic, is the former Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE. It offers VET and Higher Education programs, and has campuses in Preston, Collingwood, Epping, Fairfield, Heidelberg, Prahran, and Greensborough. It has sites in Broadmeadows and country training facilities at Eden Park, Yan Yean and Ararat.

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