FROM THE PRESIDENT

The issue of assessing the impact of our research is again becoming an important issue with universities around the country being asked to again consider ways of assessing impact. As the Group of Eight (2011) point out, measuring impact can be an elusive and fragile undertaking; impact can be negative as well as positive, can depend on the stakeholders engaged in the research enterprise and needs to acknowledge that all research builds on prior work. Ways of measuring impact can also vary enormously and can include changes to practices (for example teaching), advancing knowledge, financial returns, social and economic impacts (Group of Eight, pp. 8 – 11). With tightening fiscal conditions and funds for research becoming harder to come by, the issue of impact assumes even greater importance as policy makers, government ministers and other funding bodies need to be persuaded to choose from a wide range of meritorious and often competing priorities for funding. NCVER have taken up the issue of impact specifically for VET research in a recently released publication by John Stanwick and Jo Hargreaves entitled *Good practice guide for measuring and maximising research impact in social science research settings* (2012).

Over recent months the Executive of AVETRA has been considering a range of issues including how we measure the impact of our work and how we might act collectively to enhance the quality of research undertaken by our members. This has led to the development of a new work plan to guide the direction of the Association over the next 12–18 months. In putting together this plan the Executive has considered a number strategies including

- Developing a national network of virtual Research Hubs to provide a forum within AVETRA for the interaction between policy makers, practitioners and researchers drawn together by a common interest in a particular aspect of VET – this could be in any area which falls under the interdisciplinary remit of vocational education and training (e.g. economics, sociology, educational studies)

With tightening fiscal conditions and funds for research becoming harder to come by, the issue of impact assumes even greater importance as policy makers, government ministers and other funding bodies need to be persuaded to choose from a wide range of meritorious and often competing priorities for funding.

- Building the quality of the *International Journal of Training Research* with particular attention to building a pool of high quality reviewers and developing metrics to measure the timeliness and quality of reviews

- Building the quality of practitioner research as a pathway to other forms of research activity including masters and doctoral level studies and to promote the use of evidence-led policy and practice

- Developing an AVETRA sponsored publication outlet for Practitioner Research (for example, monographs; 'Research Briefs')

- Developing a series of 'Research Matters' webinars which bring together policy makers, researchers and practitioners. The aim is not to present research but facilitate processes to introduce dialogue and discussion, promote fresh thinking or alternative ways of engagement with issues and to provide access to the latest evidence on matters of concern for stakeholder and to support knowledge mobilisation.

The Executive have also been concerned with expanding the horizons of AVETRA by encouraging engagement with international organisations and researchers. In order to advance this goal we have engaged The Association Specialists to build a database of between 1000 and 2000 international contacts for AVETRA – comprising mainly organisations from the Asia-Pacific region as a priority target as well as Europe, the USA and Canada. This work is scheduled for completion prior to Christmas and the data base will be used to facilitate marketing the forthcoming AVETRA Conference and our journal into these regions.

As this will be the last *Research Today* before the end of 2012, on behalf of the Executive I would like to wish all AVETRA members our best wishes for a safe and enjoyable Christmas Season and a bright start to 2013.

Michele Simons – President, AVETRA

Reducing Student Attrition in VET Distance Education Programs: Implications for VET Educators

Distance education has become an attractive study option as people struggle to maintain a healthy work and life balance. However, educators in vocational education and training (VET) have come to associate high attrition rates with distance education programs. Attrition is a costly and resource draining exercise for TAFE institutions now operating with full contestability of funding. The reasons for students leaving distance education programs are not significantly different to those students studying by other delivery strategies, although there are mixed findings and ongoing debates about the importance of 'internal' and 'external' reasons. Consequently, it is necessary for VET educators to ascertain why students drop out of programs.

The paper investigated current research literature on the complexity of factors that can lead a student to withdraw from a VET distance education program before achieving an individual competency or qualification. Identified factors were classified into two main groupings: "Internal Factors" viewed as those being inside the institution's control; and "External Factors" viewed as those being outside the institution's control. Key findings from the report showed that whilst many external factors were outside an institution's direct control, there were also many within its control.

Internal factors were summarised to allow VET educators to identify those relevant to their institution's circumstances. These are shown in **Figure 1**.

External factors were summarised to allow VET educators to identify those relevant to their institution's circumstances. These are shown in **Figure 2**.

Figure 1: Internal factors associated with attrition

Category	Description of Factor Influence
Administrative procedures and process factors	• Inadequate customer service standards, students not feeling valued, response on course enquiries too long, enquiries passed from person to person • Incorrect course information and advice leading to incorrect enrolments • Websites hard to navigate, course information not up to date • Administrative processes made enrolling difficult for potential and ongoing students
VET educator factors	• Inefficient support from teachers, long turn around on marking, lack of quality feedback and help with learning difficulties, calls not returned or long response time • Teacher experience in developing, delivering and assessing distance education programs inadequate leading to poor quality learning experience • Skills and qualifications of VET educator and course content knowledge inadequate or knowledge not up-to-date • Insufficient course management skills – lack of ability to develop relationships with students • Inability to maintain regular contact with students and identify at risk students
Course factors	• Course design and development insufficient for distance education • Learning resource design, distribution, timeframes or incorrect resources, missing resources • AQF level – course too hard, written at a higher level than it should have been, workload too high • Marketing – website information not comprehensive enough or inaccurate
Recruitment factors	• Course recruitment strategies – getting the right students for the right course and at the appropriate AQF level • Course marketing strategies – marketing to the wrong demographic, not enough information, wrong perceptions for perspective students
Student support factors	• Lack of social integration with peers or communities left students feeling isolated and not feeling that they belong to a group • Inadequate study assistance, lack of support or tutorials, lack of assistance with study difficulties • Induction processes not adequate, lack of student inductions lead to student not belonging or feeling valued

Figure 2: External factors associated with attrition

Category	Description of Factor Influence
Personal factors	• Family • Health • Finance/income • Friends/social integration
Socio-economic factors	• Employment related • Unemployment related • Demographic – age, gender, no. of dependents • Disability
Motivational factors	• Level of motivation • Goals • Attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions
Learner characteristic factors	• Study experience/ qualifications achieved • Learning styles • Learner preparedness • Studying status – full-time/part-time basis

This research indicates that what makes retention complex is that no strategy is likely to fit all students and all circumstances at all times.

Conceptualisations drawn from the literature review led to the construction of a comprehensive retention strategy that incorporated a strong focus on team participation to maximise outcomes for the institution. The research concludes by reiterating that for institutions to incorporate a successful retention

strategy, cultural change is required. A positive and proactive approach is also encouraged from VET educators in the development of retention strategies for their distance education programs.

Wendy Thomas
Distance Education Teacher
Central Qld Institute of TAFE & QUT
Masters Student *(completing Feb 2013)*

"The research concludes by reiterating that for institutions to incorporate a successful retention strategy, cultural change is required".

Re-claiming legitimacy in partnership?

Evidence-based challenges for enabling sustainable economic development through multi-stakeholder partnerships between Technical and Vocational Education and Training and Small Business, in a neoliberalist policy climate

SUMMARY

A number of global policies have been launched to establish the United Nations/UNESCO Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) through Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a vehicle for encouraging local partnerships. Nearly four decades of neoliberalist policy reform have created challenges, nonetheless, for promulgating Education for Sustainable Development through TVET. This ideological lens, implemented by both sides of the political spectrum, has driven a predominant 'Education for Economic Development' discourse, which, it could be argued, has seen the marginalisation of social and environmental sustainability in TVET practices. A number of 'false consciousnesses' need contesting, being driven by this reductionist narrative of industry/TVET relationships and their contribution to the regions. Exploring the challenges for devolved multi-stakeholder governance and social partnership was deemed timely, therefore, in the light of embedding these new strategies within Vocational Education and Training (VET) in the Australian context.

This multi-disciplinary study suggests an alternative construct of 'learning ecologies' to challenge the market model and contest the authority of the predominant, neoliberalist paradigm. In 'critiquing'

four pertinent grand narratives in TVET, it adopts a qualitative lens to question the effect of this hegemonic discourse on alliances between VET and industry in one peri-urban regional community. Its critical interpretive methodology explores the impact of these competing theories of 'evidence-based policy' within a 'neopositivist' policy climate. The fieldwork was substantial, undertaken over four years, gathering data from approximately 120 semi-structured interviews and visits with a wide group of VET stakeholders. The research questions focused on the enablers and barriers to social partnerships building, as seen through the 'lifeworld' of VET practitioners and small enterprise owners, in one 'high growth', regional economy.

The findings are presented as an informative study tour constructing a new narrative 'silenced' by this predominant widely-accepted discourse that reveals evidence of the antithetical impact of globalising neoliberalist policies on multi-stakeholder alliances at the local level. The study found that neoliberalism has driven numerous complex ideological 'dissonances' and inconsistencies at the policy level, which constrain the practice of social partnerships building for both VET and industry stakeholders. Of concern is that this predominant ideology, whilst capacity building in theory, can be capacity reducing for enabling the

convergence of these grand narratives in TVET and realising more sustainable economic development.

The study concludes that enabling a 'Sustainable Learning Region' will demand more probity, stability and legitimacy in strategic policy-making, to encourage the collaborative devolution necessary for promulgating VET partnerships at the regional level. This local change-management and 'place leadership' (Beer 2011) needs to embed new shared 'values-sets' to support the practice of Education for Sustainable Development, alongside reclaiming the democratic foundations for alliance-building between self-preservationist, fragmented, and now, highly competitive regional stakeholders. These interpretive portrayals and 'impressionist' educational cartography (Pascale 2011) will be of interest to policy-makers, practitioners, industry and enterprises and those seeking more enlightenment, emancipation and empowerment from the way in which neoliberalism has constrained the political climate for enabling social partnerships and Joined Up Multi-stakeholder Governance in Australia's regions.

Karen Plane
Thesis submitted for the fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy November 2011, conferred 16 August 2012, University of South Australia.

Change, work and learning: aligning continuing education and training

Phase 1

In 2011, a Griffith University research team undertook the first phase of a 3-year project looking at sustaining, securing and further developing employability in the Australian workforce. In that phase, we interviewed managers and employees in two industry sectors – Community Services and Health and Transport and Logistics – about their needs for a system of continuing education and training (CET).

We asked employees about how they learned to keep up to date and what their learning preferences are; we asked employers and managers how they managed workforce and individual development; and we asked educational providers about their strategies and challenges in working with employers and individuals to keep workers' skills up to date. This is how we summarised what they told us:

1. Preferred models of CET

According to those we interviewed in Phase 1, the most preferred models for providing and organising CET are:

- Work-based experiences with direct guidance (e.g. shadowing, mentoring)
- Opportunity-based learning experiences (i.e. as work events permit)
- Work-based experiences with educational interventions (e.g. training + work-based practice)

2. Preferred ways of supporting learning in CET

Those same informants told us that the most appropriate ways of engaging in CET are through:

- Individuals working alone: e.g. engaging with resources; doing individual projects; undertaking tertiary/higher education studies
- Working and learning with another person: e.g. expert-novice; peer-sharing; joint project; mentoring; coaching etc.; guided learning in the workplace
- Facilitated/expert guided group processes, e.g. group facilitated discussion; staff meeting; toolbox meetings

- Integration of experiences in work and education settings
- Workplace experiences – The provision of experiences including sequencing, access to and engagement in workplace activities from which individuals learn
- Direct support for learning – Direct support to individuals or groups from a more experienced worker is needed to learn the capacities required to perform the occupational tasks effectively
- Individualised support for learning – Direct and individualised support for the learners to meet their individual needs and preferences is highly valued.

Elements of an effective CET system

From the responses summarised above, we came to a tentative conclusion that six elements are necessary for an effective system of CET:

1. Organisation of experiences in ways which assist individuals to learn the knowledge and skills they require for sustaining their employability
2. Guidance by experts, teachers, and more experienced co-workers
3. Active and effortful participation by learners
4. Development of active and intentional learners
5. Nationally recognized occupational certification to fulfil the needs for employment and recognition
6. Accommodation of variations in occupational practice within certification and qualification systems.

Phase 2

In Phase 2 of the project, we have been testing our initial conclusions with managers and workers in other industries – Mining, Services, and Financial Services – as well as undertaking further explorations in the aged and disabled care sectors. We are collating and analysing the information we have collected from worksites across Australia, and will issue a further bulletin when those tasks are completed.

Because our sources of information must remain confidential, we cannot identify organisations or individuals by name, but we would like to acknowledge the willing and generous assistance and co-operation of employers, managers and workers in cities and rural areas since the project began.

Phase 3 will involve the development of draft sets of models and practices for CET that might sustain, secure and advance employability across working lives.

We welcome feedback on any of the above.

Contacts

For more information about this project please contact:

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Learning in the Franchise Panopticon: competency, Foucault and new franchisee learning

In 2012, self-employed training consultant Julia Camm Evans satisfied the requirements for Doctor of Education at the University of Melbourne's Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Her thesis produces fresh, Foucauldian insights on how new franchisees learn prior to being open for business.

Franchising is essentially a form of economic organisation – a business distribution strategy – where *franchisors* have the opportunity to expand their business by utilising the financial and human resources of *franchisees*. Franchisees, in turn, have the opportunity to enter into a commercial arrangement that may fulfil their goals and aspirations. Franchise systems are distributive in nature, as they are network of workplaces aiming to behave the same way by using mutually understood and shared operating standards and systems, language and practices. Knowledge and the application of practice is distributed within the network and embodied within the individuals practicing the discourse of the franchise system.

The thesis answers the specific research question: *what are the main learning practices for prospective franchisees adopted by the franchise sector and to what extent are these practices being challenged by the imperative to be open for business?* The Australian franchise sector is significant, mature and regulated. Yet, the call for greater prospective franchisee education has been a recurring key recommendation from recent Federal Government inquiries into good franchising practices. However, little is known about how learning and education is designed, delivered and experienced by franchisees. A blend of conceptual analysis and fieldwork was used to answer the research question, using mixed-methods. The conceptual analysis provoked, following Foucault, fresh insights, and assembled

"The conceptual analysis provoked, following Foucault, fresh insights, and assembled a new perspective on how prospective franchisees access and experience Competency-Based Training prior to being open for business."

a new perspective on how prospective franchisees access and experience Competency-Based Training prior to being open for business. Fieldwork was used to advance these insights, consisting of a qualitative online questionnaire and individual stories sourced by interviews. These methods provided current franchisees with an opportunity to reflect on their own learning journey prior to being open for business.

Julia Camm Evans
Doctor of Education
University of Melbourne

NCVER forthcoming research: participation in university, and pathways from VET to university

NCVER has three research projects underway looking at the tertiary education participation and transition from VET to university of two equity groups – rural students and Indigenous students – and the transition from VET to university from a provider perspective.

A project by David Curtis and colleagues from Flinders University explores some of the reasons behind the lower university participation of rural youth through an analysis of data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth and an evaluation of a Flinders University mentoring program. They found that lower participation for rural students was fundamentally driven by the lower socio-economic status of rural youth. Compared with their higher socioeconomic background peers, low socioeconomic students have less favourable attitudes towards school, lower achievement at school, and less ambitious post-school study and career aspirations. Thus the over-representation of low socioeconomic youth in rural areas, gives rise to low participation in rural areas, even if location plays no direct part. The evaluation of the mentoring program was positive. The authors found that the sustained mentoring of students in rural and low socioeconomic schools helps raise aspirations towards university study. The main impact was that the mentoring reduced the risk of the unknown. Interestingly, while mentoring increased aspirations towards university study, it did not reduce aspirations for VET programs.

Susan Bandias and colleagues from Charles Darwin University are interested in the collaboration between VET and university in dual sector universities and improving access to education, particularly university, for Indigenous students. Their forthcoming report investigates the pathways adopted by Indigenous students in their transition from VET to university. Using Charles Darwin University as an example, they look at the retention, progression and attrition rates among Indigenous students in the VET sector. They also interviewed 30 Indigenous VET and higher education students to gain insights into their experience in the transition from VET to university.

The authors find that although the percentage of Indigenous enrolments in VET and university at CDU is relatively high compared with the national average, enrolment numbers are still low compared to non-Indigenous enrolments. Also, compared to non-Indigenous students, the retention and completion rate of Indigenous students is low. Indigenous enrolments are also skewed towards the lower-level courses. Bandias and colleagues find that for the students who had completed a higher level VET course (certificate IV and above), the pathway from VET to university is a viable option, with around 17% of Indigenous admissions to higher education based on previous VET. However, this pathway is available to relatively few students, due to the low the number of graduates at   **>**

From previous page

the certificate IV, diploma and advanced diploma level.

The students who had progressed from VET to university generally felt that their previous VET study was relevant, but some students were unprepared for the more academic environment of university and the emphasis on online learning. Some of the participants experienced financial difficulties, and over three quarters of students interviewed worked either full-time or part time while studying; leading many to struggle to manage their study workload.

Around a third of the students interviewed are from remote areas, and had moved to urban locations to study. Some of these students found the physical, social and linguistic isolation associated with relocation to be very challenging, suggesting that these factors may act as a barrier to completing a qualification and pursing further education.

Looking at VET to university pathways from a provider perspective, Louise Watson from the University of Canberra examined how different universities approach VET-HE pathways and the differences in university admission rates on the basis of a VET award. She finds that

one third of Australian universities provide two-thirds of the pathways for VET award-holders entering undergraduate programs in Australia. In particular, only seven large providers consistently admit high numbers of VET award holders across all fields of education. The remaining universities admitted small numbers across the broad fields of education. In addition, Watson finds that the pathway from VET to university is not always involve diploma level study. Although the proportion of VET award-holders with qualifications at diploma level and above who move onto university do so at double the rate of VET graduates with lower level qualifications (certificate III or below), the total number of certificate-holders at levels II, III and IV studying at university six-months after graduating is almost twice the number of diploma graduates. This pattern is consistent across most fields of education.

As well as these individual research projects, NCVER has built the 'Pathways Support for Practitioners' collection in VOCEDplus, with funding support from the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIIRSTE). The aim of this collection is to capture the vast amount of research and resources on educational pathways and provide access to pathways-related material. The pathways collection

"Some of these students found the physical, social and linguistic isolation associated with relocation to be very challenging, suggesting that these factors may act as a barrier to completing a qualification and pursing further education."

is sourced from material already in VOCEDplus, and contains 55 entries to date. These resources are categorised in the areas of general research and policy; resources for practitioners; and occupation specific material (such as engineering and nursing).

The page also contains a link to an online user community – the Pathways Practitioners Community, which enables practitioners to engage and network with other practitioners in the field. The Pathways Support for Practitioners collection and the Pathways Practitioners Community were made available in September 2012. Curtis et al, Bandias et al, and Watson will be available at **www.voced.edu.au/content/pathways** when they are published late in the year.

Georgina Atkinson

Predicting who will complete their apprenticeship

Non-completion rates within trade apprenticeship training have long garnered the attention of researchers, industry stakeholders and funding government bodies. Despite this attention, non-completion rates have remained stubbornly high over the last decade (Dickie, McDonald, & Pedic, 2011) and currently hover in the range of 44-46% in Australia.

Previous research highlights a range of factors relating to attrition and completions across apprenticeships. Some researchers suggest that establishing a profile of factors is difficult because the combination of factors is multifaceted and idiosyncratic (GTA, 2005). Notwithstanding, others suggest that factors affecting completion are better understood within the context of a particular occupation (Harris et al., 2001). It is within this perspective that this quantitative research seeks to expand the understanding of why certain individuals complete their trade qualification while others do not.

This study aims to build a predictive model for plumbing apprenticeship completions along with a confirmatory analysis against one other construction trade, namely bricklaying apprenticeships. The intent of this investigation is to explore whether a predictive model of apprenticeship completion at the occupational level is viable and instructive.

A logistic regression analysis for surveyed plumbing apprentices (N=1016) was conducted with stepwise selection to devise a predictive model for apprenticeship completions. The survey contained a total of 144 potential factors devised from focus groups in six States. Of the 144 factors, only 24 of these factors were found to be significant predictors, suggesting many commonly held beliefs are not statistically significant in distinguishing between those likely to complete and those likely to drop-out of their apprenticeship. For plumbing apprentices, the model indicates that a randomly chosen apprentice likely to complete (i.e. our outcome variable) has a 78.1% probability of being ranked higher than a randomly chosen apprentice likely to drop out by this classifying model (AUC= .781, p<.001, CI = .749 to .813). A selection of the significant findings on

factors is presented to give the reader a feel for some of the results.

Plumbing apprentices were more likely to complete when they enjoyed working with their hands and seeing the results of their work. They also saw plumbing as a respected trade. Surprisingly, plumbers more likely to complete were no different than those likely to drop-out on the following factors: whether they enjoyed working outdoors, the physical work, if they had completed a school-based apprenticeship, expected earnings upon completion, and difficulty in schoolwork (to name just a few).

Most influential in their decision to take up a plumbing apprenticeship were plumbers they had talked to and school advisors. For example, those likely to complete were 49% more likely to have been influenced by a plumber in their decision. Notably, parents, family members and family business opportunities were not found to be distinguishing factors.

"Plumbing apprentices who rated the institute highly on delivering 'easy to understand teaching' were 5.6 times more likely to complete, when compared to those who rated this factor very poorly."

Surprisingly, plumbing apprentices were less likely to complete where they had perceived (i.e. note that this is the perception of the apprentice) their career advisor to be very knowledgeable about plumbing. However, the influence of career advisors was more positive when they encouraged a TAFE pathway in general.

Certain factors within the training institute were critical to completions. Plumbing apprentices who rated the institute highly on delivering 'easy to understand teaching' were 5.6 times more likely to complete, when compared to those who rated this factor very poorly. Further, apprentices who perceived the training facilities to be 'good' were 76% more likely to complete, when compared to apprentices who perceived the facilities to be very poor. Notable factors which did not significantly predict completions included, flexibility in training dates, currency of skills taught, perceived knowledge of teachers, cost of training, group projects and travel time (to name a few).

The factors associated with the employer experience were, as a group, very influential. Plumbing apprentices who perceived their employer to be very inflexible in their teaching skills, were 94% less likely to complete when compared to

apprentices with employers who were perceived to be very flexible in the teaching skills. Answering questions and being treated without respect were also significant factors. Factors that were found not to be significant included job variety, people they work with, working outdoors and being left alone to do jobs they don't understand (to name a few).

The second sample was conducted with 369 bricklaying apprentices across Australia. The same 24 predictors used in the plumbing apprenticeship model also significantly predicted bricklaying apprentices likely to complete their apprenticeship (AUC= .757, p<.001, CI = .702 to .812). However, when a separate stepwise logistic regression analysis was conducted for the bricklayers with the complete set of 144 factors, a somewhat different set of factors emerged in a significant model with a higher ability to predict completions (AUC= .868, p<.001, CI= .828 to .908).

This research highlights the significant and important factors which distinguish between apprentices most likely to complete from those most likely to drop-out for plumbing and bricklaying apprenticeships. Whilst these two occupations share some common factors, this study also highlights that there are substantial differences in what factors predict completions for the two trades. Plumbing and bricklaying apprentices have differing interests and support needs; this report specifies those factors. The study opens the door to a better quantified understanding (i.e. through the use of odds ratios) of the factors which may well improve the likelihood of apprenticeship completions through better selection and training support.

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Tim Powers, Altegis Group

16th AVETRA International Conference

The Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle WA
Wednesday, 3 April – Friday, 5 April 2013

VET Research at the Edge:
Training for Diversity and Change

Etienne Wenger
Communities of Practice

Stephen Billett
ARC Fellowship
"The Future of VET"

Rod McDonald
No small change -
"VET Research 20 years on"

Colleen Hayward
Pro V-C ECU
'Indigenous Pathways"

Philipp Gonon
University of Zurich
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