Research Today

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Message from the AVETRA President

The AVETRA 2009 conference was recently held at Coogee Beach in Sydney, which smiled upon us with perfect weather. 162 delegates attended, including people from Germany, New Zealand, the United Arab Emirates and England. Keynote speaker Penny Jane Burke from the UK encouraged us to think in a broader context about widening participation and what this means for admission to qualifications and for support. Yvonne Hiller, also from the UK, talked about how policy comes into being, using the example of 'key skills' to illustrate her arguments. Australian keynote speakers from the policy arena comprised Philip Bullock, the Chair of Skills Australia, Craig Robertson, Group Manager at the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, and Tom Karmel the Managing Director of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Pam Christie, the Director of Sydney Institute of TAFE, opened the conference and presided over the welcome reception. The policy speakers emphasised the volatile nature of VET and its need to respond to prevailing and often rapidly changing economic conditions. They challenged researchers to undertake research into the competitive training market, noting that there was a lot of opinion on the issue but very little research. Craig Robertson emphasised the importance of public dialogue 'to keep us honest'. Conference participants presented 66 papers (many peer-reviewed) and workshops in a breathtaking range of topic areas. Papers and presentations can be found on the AVETRA web site.

2010 AVETRA conference 7-9 April, Gold Coast. Next year's conference is being planned by a group of Queensland members and other university and VET personnel. Stephen Billett and Sarojni Choy are the co-convenors and overseas keynote speakers are Professor Richard D Lakes, Georgia State University, USA and Professor Laurent Filliettaz, University of Geneva. This is a school holiday week again, so bring your children with you! The Gold Coast has plenty of affordable accommodation. The following week, The New Zealand Industry Training Federation is holding its Research Forum. Overseas members might like to start planning a visit to cover both events.

The Excellence in Research for Australia exercise is under way, managed by the Australian Research Council. This exercise replaces the now-defunct Research Quality Framework. While VET as a discipline is not to be included until 2010, many of you will be watching what happens with the two 2009 discipline areas. TAFE staff in dual-sector universities will be able to have their publications included in the ERA, and I will be following up with the ARC to obtain more details for you.

This edition of *Research Today* focuses on 'how to get research funding'. We include insights from the NCVER, a major source of funding for VET researchers, and from several researchers who have been consistently successful in research applications. We also include an article on mixed-method research, fast becoming a preferred approach to researching VET, and reports from the AVETRA pre-conference workshops.

Erica Smith

Contributions to *Research Today*
We welcome contributions from members of AVETRA to 'Research Today'. Contributions should preferably be 500 words or less and should focus on VET researchers, researching and the impact of research. Please send your contribution to me at e.smith@ballarat.edu.au, or you may phone first to discuss your idea, on 03-5327 9665.

Erica Smith, Editor, Research Today

Mixed methods: the third methodological movement

Dr Ros Cameron
Lecturer – Human Resource Management
School of Commerce & Management
Southern Cross University

Mixed methods research is an emerging methodological movement with a growing body of trans-disciplinary literature. Prominent research methodologists/authorities from across discipline fields are emerging and guiding the commentary and the movements' momentum. Creswell and Plano Clark have concluded that 'today, we see cross-cultural international interest, interdisciplinary interest, publication possibilities, and public and private funding opportunities for mixed methods research' (2007: 18).

Definitions
Mixed method research is a growing area of methodological choice for many academics and researchers from across a variety of discipline areas. Several definitions of mixed methods exist. For example the *Journal of Mixed Methods* (2006), in its call for papers defines mixed methods as 'research in which the investigator collects, analyses, mixes, and draws inferences from both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or a program of inquiry'. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) prefer to define mixed methods research as that in which the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study.

Purpose of mixed methods: Why use it?
The overall purpose and central premise of mixed methods studies is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems and complex phenomena than either approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007). Mixed methods research designs are said to add value through providing a more comprehensive and richer understanding of the research problem being investigated. This is because the approach explores the problem through the different lenses and perspectives of qualitative and quantitative research techniques.

Authorities and publications
Mixed methods grew in popularity in specific discipline fields (education, health, nursing and social sciences) and emerged out of the UK and continental Europe before catching the eye of academics and researchers in the USA. Interest in mixed methods in Australian based research to date has come from the social sciences, nursing and health and business and management studies.
Several authorities have been emerging as mixed methodologist researchers and theorists. The most comprehensive publication of mixed methods to date has been the edited *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioural Research* (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003). Another very practical guide to conducting mixed methods is a book by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research.* Academic journals dedicated to mixed methods research are:

- *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*
- *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*
- *The International Journal of Mixed Methods in Applied Business and Policy Research*

Research design and typologies
Over the last several years there have emerged over 40 mixed methods research designs. This can be very confusing for doctoral candidates, early career researchers and even established researchers. In response to this Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2006) have come up with a three dimensional, integrated typology of mixed methods research designs. The authors saw the need to limit the level of confusion related to the plethora of mixed methods research designs available and to assist researchers in simplifying their choices when first deciding to engage in mixed methods research.

Practical issues
In practical terms those wishing to utilise mixed methods research designs need to be proficient in both qualitative and quantitative research methods. In addition to this they need to be very familiar with a small but growing body of literature on mixed methods. No matter what research method employed the researcher needs to rigorously defend their methodological choices. Recent editorial comments from the latest issue of the *Journal of Mixed Methods* (2009, Vol. 3, No. 9) and my own research into the use of mixed methods in business studies, points to a ground swell movement for mixed methods coming from postgraduate research students themselves.

Creswell JW and Plano Clark VL (2007) *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Johnson RB and Onwuegbuzie AJ (2004) Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come, *Educational Researchers* 33(7): 14-26.

Leech, NL and Onwuegbuzie AJ (2006) A Typology of mixed methods research designs, *Quality and Quantity,* 42(2): 265-275.

Tashakkori A and Teddlie C (Eds.) (2003) *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research,* Sage, California.

How to get research funding - a funding agency perspective

Jo Hargreaves
Senior Project Officer and Bridget Wibrow,
Graduate Research Officer
Research Management Branch (NCVER)

We recognise the challenges inherent in obtaining research funding. Preparing a proposal takes time and effort. It is then frustrating if a promising research idea is returned to the shelf.

Research for the VET sector is fashioned by the national priorities endorsed by ministers. NCVER provides funding for research through at least one competitive funding round each year. We also accommodate innovative thinking beyond the priorities in an 'open category' funding round. A panel comprising a wide range of stakeholders is responsible for selecting the research.

Why do some proposals not get funded? The simplest answer is that the number of proposals exceeds the limited funds available. It is competitive; this is a fact of life.

For this article we conducted a review of proposal evaluations from previous funding rounds to identify how you can improve the probability of success. This article highlights the main issues and recommends how to avoid the most common pitfalls when writing your next proposal.

Our review suggests one of the primary challenges for researchers is explaining how their research feeds into 'policy and practice'. Conveying clearly how the proposed research aids understanding of the key policy and practice issues will improve your proposal.

Another commonly cited weakness identified is an unsuitable methodology or one that is not clearly defined. Demonstrating that the methodology is an unsuitable methodology or one that is not clearly defined. Demonstrating that the methodology is suitable to answer the research questions posed and that it follows sound statistical or research practice, and is transparent, is essential for a good proposal. NCVER expects that the conclusion from your research will be based on empirical evidence rather than opinion or advocacy.

Explaining how the research will add to the current body of knowledge is another challenge for researchers. Spending time searching the VOCED database (http://www.voced.edu.au/index.html) can help you determine whether your research is duplicating what has gone before. It will also encourage you to identify other sources of information beyond your own work in the area.

The best piece of advice we can give you is probably the most obvious. Write the proposal clearly and succinctly. A well-developed and well-written proposal, especially one that tells an interesting story, is critical.

What happens when you can honestly say you have 'ticked all the boxes' but still don't get funding? Unfortunately many good proposals do not make it over the line. We encourage you to think about the DICE factor when developing your next proposal:

- what aspects will **differentiate** your proposal from the rest,
- how will it **influence** the thinking about issues,
- does it **comply** with the guidelines, and
- does it **excite** through innovative thinking.

So roll the dice, and you may well improve your chances of success!

How to get research funding - researchers' experiences

To highlight some of the considerations taken when applying for research funding, a number of researchers that have had success with applications for NCVER funding were invited to offer some of their own experiences and advice regarding this topic.

Respondents were: Berwyn Clayton *(Director, Work-based Education Research Centre- Victoria University)*, Fran Ferrier *(Monash University)*, Victor Callan *(University of Queensland)*, Gerald Burke *(Executive Director of Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET)- Monash University - retired)*, Roger Harris *(University of South Australia)*, Andy Smith *(University of Ballarat)* and Peter Waterhouse *(Managing Director - Workplace Learning Initiatives Pty Ltd.)* kindly provided some useful insight from their responses to the following questions.

To protect confidentiality, the order in which responses are listed below is not the same as order of the list of researchers; however each respondent's thread may be followed through by reading responses for person A, B and so on, except for the question on the best research project idea, where responses have been mixed up as they were too readily identifiable.

▲ How do you decide on a topic to research?

A: "*If it fits into the agenda listed by the granting agency and if I have existing direct expertise or if I have expertise in a related area that will allow me to do this project or finally, if I know people I can team with who allow me access to such expertise that can be added to my own to complete the project. Guiding all of this is the opportunity to do*

research that is novel, extends our understanding conceptually and at practical level, and that I will enjoy doing."

B: *"Most of my work in recent years has been on funded consultancies so most topics have been specified in advance, but they are nearly all in the economics of education and training and therefore connected with previous work undertaken. Other work has been stimulated by the lack of information in an area or my view that the 'conventional wisdom' lacks supporting evidence. My work on educational expenditure has been stimulated by this."*

C: *"I match my own interests and 'gut feelings' with cutting edge issues that can be gleaned from my general reading, participation in recent relevant conferences, analysing recent reports and the like. If possible, I like to build on any research issues that have emerged from my previously completed project(s), where such issues may not have been the central theme being researched then, but they emerged during the course of the research and I think, 'Well, that's an issue that I could follow up in another project!'. Another way is in talking over ideas with colleagues in one's own research centre or in other research centres. Yet another way is participating in international events and keeping one's eyes and especially ears open to new ideas, and then reflecting how these may or may not be relevant to the Australian context."*

D: *"I try to marry the topics in which I am interested and have developed a research agenda to the NCVER priorities. This usually involves tailoring my research interests to the needs of NCVER and the VET sector more generally. This works well because it brings together my research expertise with the NCVER's own identified research needs."*

E: *"On the whole I don't get many opportunities to choose a topic because the research I do is usually in response to client specifications. However, it does happen (very) occasionally and I like to take the opportunity to follow up questions and issues that have arisen out of previous research and/or my own reading and learning that look as if they might lead to some interesting and useful results."*

F: *"I always choose a research topic which is not only of real interest to me, it is also a burning issue for practitioners in RTOs or policymakers in VET. My key focus is to identify potential solutions to practical problems and work with people to implement change in the field."*

G: *"Potential topics emerge through dialogue within our team and with other VET colleagues. They arise from conversations reflecting upon our own practice and VET practice more broadly. Deciding on whether to submit a tender, and determining a focus/question for a competitive tender, is a matter of weighing up several different factors. How interesting and important is the question/issue to*

you as the researcher - (if it's not, drop it). Is the question/issue also of wider significance or importance - for VET, for the system, for the nation? Does the research have significant implications for policy and/or practice? (Most importantly) is it likely to attract funding? These latter considerations are about 'reading the world' and making judgements - being mindful that even worthy ideas aren't always successful in competitive tendering processes."*

▲ **How do you decide what research methods to use?**

A: *"I am trained in both qualitative and quantitative methods with bias to the quant. But ideally and in almost all cases, I choose multi method approaches that allow me to combine early qualitative data gained by interviews or possibly case study and a literature review, with new quantitative data gained by survey research or interrogation of existing data bases."*

B: *"Nearly all the research work I have done in recent years has been in collaboration. We choose the methods appropriate to the problem and often use both quantitative and qualitative methods, which the research team can cover."*

C: *"The research question(s) dictates the methods. Personally, I almost always use the Mixed Methods approach, as I strongly believe that combinations of methods generate the most accurate picture on one's research topic. Consideration on the scope of the project helps to determine (usually limit) what and how much one can 'use'."*

D: *"This varies with the topic area. I often use mixed method, e.g. survey and case study, but sometimes will rely on one approach. It depends on the scope of the project and the need for depth (qualitative) versus coverage and generalisability (quantitative)."*

E: *"A general rule of thumb is to choose methods that are fit for purposes that will enable the fullest possible explorations of the research questions. Other factors include costs, timeliness, the skills required and the degree of difficulty. It's good to be creative and innovative - as long as the methods you choose enable the work to be conducted as well as possible, within time and budget limitations. It's also good to choose methods that rely on the skills you already have in the research team, or can acquire readily (e.g. by bringing in another team member)."*

F: *"I prefer qualitative or mixed method approaches because that is where my skills lie."*

G: *"We tend to 'stick' to the kinds of research approaches we know we are good at - we're interested in qualitative work, such as critical studies, descriptive, narrative, case study, and*

interview based projects ... We recognise that such methods are not suited to all questions."

▲ How do you decide who to approach to be part of your research team?

A: *"If, 1. I think I will learn something new from them; 2. they have expertise I do not have; 3. I hear they are good to work with, in that they are: (a) well organised, (b) do their share of the work on time, (c) have good networks into the people we want to investigate."*

B: *"We approach persons whose skills we know, who have a record of getting work completed, who write clearly and whom we know we would be able to work with productively and cooperatively."*

C: *"I reflect on how the proposal I have in mind is likely to have the best chance of winning a grant. The ARC in particular is particularly brutal in having in its assessment criteria the calibre of researchers in the team and their track records, so one has to be especially careful in selecting a team in the case of that funding body. Other funding bodies are usually not so brutal. I look for such things as: potential team members' capabilities vis-a-vis the nature of the project and its methods, whether I can work with them (this is important in close working team relationships), whether their skills complement mine, where there may be gaps in the team in knowledge or State coverage, etc. Another consideration is including in the team an Early Career Researcher or postgraduate candidate in order to help build their track record and their skills through mentoring."*

D: *"I have a few trusted individuals with whom I tend to work on a regular basis. Picking a research team is probably one of the most difficult aspects of being a VET researcher. You have to able to trust research colleagues and be confident that they think on your wavelength."*

E: *"Usually we look for people who can add to the team, for instance who have skills in a particular area that are needed for the project. Proven ability in research and writing are also important, as is motivation, attitude and team-working ability. So some factors depend on the particular project and others relate to the experience and aptitudes of the person. We also rely to some extent on recommendations from others."*

F: *"I keep myself abreast of what other researchers are doing in the sector and network with those who are working in areas similar to mine. Having worked in a number of research teams, I know how important it is to have confidence in individual team members and their ability to get things done. Trust is a big part of successful research teams. You may elect to build a team with people who have complementary skills or 'capture' someone who will bring a different focus and skills into the project. I*

like to encourage an inexperienced researcher to join my team, because in early times someone offered me that opportunity and it was a great learning experience."

G: *"We've collaborated with many colleagues over a range of projects; established relationships, trust, and values matches are probably the key elements."*

▲ How long does it take you to prepare an NCVER application?

A: *"5 days."*

B: *"Hard to estimate but at least a week's full time work for the lead researcher and the contributions of other members of the team have to be added."*

C: *"This is a difficult question to answer. The time varies, depending on whether I have a 'head start' on the topic or not, how many partners are being included, the complexity of the proposal, etc. Preparing an NCVER proposal is less time than preparing one for the ARC, though the follow-up and monitoring post-proposal to the end of the project is far more hands-on with NCVER than with the ARC."*

D: *"About 4 weeks. It depends on how well I have worked out the topic in my head. The clearer the topic, the quicker it is to write the proposal."*

E: *"This is a good question! The time can vary - it depends for instance if we already have some ideas or material we can adapt or if we have to start from scratch. Both offer their own challenges. Developing the research questions early on is crucial - the rest of the work depends on this. In itself this can take some time, with ideas evolving as they move between team members and contextual material is examined. Once these questions are resolved you can move on to looking at the methods, the skills required (and skill gaps in the research team) and the budget. Over the years the process has speeded up as we have become more adept; however to produce a good application can still take a week of work or more. While it is possible to throw an application together in a hurry when you have to, this usually shows up in the quality."*

F: *"The time it takes tends to vary according to the methodology and the clarity of the concept in your head."*

G: *"It varies - sometimes we wrestle with an idea for a considerable period of time, draft and re-draft the proposal, and have several (time consuming) meetings and discussions along the way. However the length of time involved seems (in our experience) to bear no direct correlation to the success or failure of the tender. We have had success and failure with various tenders, some*

_____

quite time consuming, others which 'fell together' quickly. However clarity of thought, intention, and method is important in the tender, however long it takes."

▲ What is the best project idea you have had, and why?

- *"I don't think I can limit to any one project idea as 'the best'! I can think of at least five very interesting project ideas:*
(a) the two projects mentioned above - published by NCVER as 'Student Traffic', and 'Crazy Paving or Stepping Stones?' - because these projects critically interrogated the notion of 'pathway' and what it actually meant to learners. The idea of student movement between sectors, both ways, and learning 'pathways', was politically just beginning to become topical then and has become more so now with the Bradley Review and its advocacy of an integrated tertiary education system.
(b) the ARC Linkage Grant project with SA Police ('There was movement at the station, for the word had passed around': A study of work-based learning in South Australia Police), on their professional development program for probationary constables - because this again was topical: at that time, the SA State Government was cutting back on the amount of time (6 months) learners were in the Police Academy undergoing training and therefore we were keen to explore the issues of how they were learning, what they were learning and from whom in the period between leaving the Academy and 18 months later becoming fully-fledged police officers.
(c) A study of on and off-job sites as learning environments, published by NCVER as 'Learning the Job' - because it was one of the first attempts to identify what each of these learning sites actually contributed to the learning of apprentices.
(d) Staff development for VET teachers, published by NCVER as 'The changing role of staff development for teachers and trainers in VET' - because it was the first national attempt to understand issues relating to staff development in the VET sector such as who was getting it, what were they doing, what role was it playing, etc.
(e) Research on informal workplace trainers, published by NCVER as 'More than meets the eye? Rethinking the role of workplace trainer' - because it was the first time that there had been an Australian study on people in industry who help others learn but do not have the title of trainer nor even have training as their primary role in the organisation."

- *"Where I saw an opportunity to do a multi method project that used qualitative and quantitative data, and allowed me to access an existing network into the prisons system and to examine their data on the VET system in prisons. It was a novel project that led to very significant findings that were of interest to policy makers in both prisons and the VET sectors."*

- *" 'Sustaining the skillbase of Australian RTOs' was my best idea because it focused on a critical problem in my own organisation and other TAFE institutes. The project offered the opportunity to find out the state of play in Australia, but also to examine strategies from overseas that had significant potential for use in Australia. The literature around the topic was fascinating and the research write-up was challenging. I learned much from the whole project."*

- *"Probably the work I did a few years ago on training and organisational change processes. This hit the mark at the time because it promised to open up the back box of employer training and it got good critical recognition from other researchers in this area globally."*

- *"I don't know which has been our 'best' idea. We've had ideas we thought were terrific, which have not been funded; we've had research projects which have helped us build new skills and organisational capacity; we've had other projects which have taken us into new fields; some of our work seems to have had some influence upon the field. For us, the 'best' research is that which has genuine implications for practice and policy.*
As practitioner-researchers we are in a position to act immediately upon the findings of our research - and have our continuing practice influence our subsequent directions and investigations as researchers. The policy influence is less direct, takes longer, and is difficult to assess - but we keep trying."

- *"Probably my next one! Every time you finish a project you think ' it would have been better if we'd done....', but of course you don't know this when you start! I get excited about new ideas - something that hasn't been done before; by ideas that look as if the research could help to solve a problem or improve a situation; and by ideas that are challenging and will require some deep thinking and lead to some learning. One of the most interesting projects I've done explored the connections between VET and the national innovation system - something that hadn't been done before, that involved a good deal of learning on my part; and that has had some substantial impacts. My ongoing equity and social inclusion work also continues to be exciting and rewarding."*

- *"Probably to analyse Australia's educational expenditures across all education and training sectors, including accounting for price changes."*

▲ What advice would you give someone preparing a research grant application?

A: *"1. Allocate sufficient time; 2. Make sure it meets the criteria; 3. Make sure it is research and not an evaluation exercise; 4. Make sure your expertise or that of your team, match the demands of the*

6

project; 5. Identify relevant previous research through a solid mini literature review."

B: "Specify work that you can accomplish within the time specified and within the funds you have sought. Have a main single aim for the work and make sure that the sections of the study connect clearly to the main aim. Spell out what you can do and what you cannot do in the project. If there is negotiation by the funding agency about the topic and method do not agree to use a method you think inappropriate and do not agree to accomplish more than you can reasonably expect to do."

C: "I would suggest the following: read the guidelines very carefully; reflect on the topic and on the issues I have described above; assess critically and honestly whether you have the knowledge, skills and especially passion for doing this project should it win a grant; if you are new to the process, team up with an experienced researcher and learn the ropes; prepare thoroughly by reading around the topic; take special care in crafting a sharp research question or two or three, and the appropriate methodology and methods to address those questions; be realistic in the budgeting and the setting of timeframes; consider constructing a research team if at all possible because that gives you a chance to learn from others' approaches and ideas, it is more fun working with others and the project will be a better piece of work as a result. (An example in my case was conceptualising and preparing the proposal in a team for the National VET Research Consortium, 'Supporting VET Providers in Building Capability for the Future'.)"

D: "Look very carefully at the NCVER's priorities and what they want from the research. Then make sure that you hit the mark with the research proposal. Make the proposal interesting to read for the NCVER panel members (who are not usually academics) and make sure you have a robust method."

E: "Read the supporting documentation very carefully so that you make sure your proposal meets the specifications and provides all the material required. If you don't do this your proposal will usually fail."

F: "Before you put fingers to keyboard, clarify the purpose of your project and double check to determine whether it is a new idea or building on work previously done. Then think about your target audience and check with a member of that audience to validate the idea."

G: "Have an original idea or 'fresh' angle which captures the imagination. Focus on issues or questions which matter to you - and to VET.
Be clear about focus and method. Say it succinctly."

Reports from AVETRA Pre-Conference Workshops 2009

55 people attended pre-conference workshops on a range of research issues. The workshops were a great success and reports from the presenters are included below. We are very grateful to the presenters who put much work into preparing their workshops, and of course to all who attended and contributed to their success. Pre-conference workshops will be a feature of AVETRA 2010.

▲ Teacher qualifications for the VET sector
**Associate Professor Ros Brennan Kemmis
Charles Sturt University**

The workshop began with a scan of the current and future environment for VET teachers and trainers. There was focus on reconceptualising the role of the VET practitioner given the changing relationship between VET and Higher Education as expressed in the recently released Bradley Review and the policy direction provided by Julia Gillard at the Big Skills Conference. The consensus was that these policy initiatives generally, and the emphasis on students enrolling and achieving higher level VET sector qualifications specifically, require that the VET professional will also hold higher and more rigorous qualifications.

The 20 workshop participants originated from a variety of backgrounds, including those from NCVER, ACER, TAFE, universities, government, union, as well as students. Participants met in small groups in the second half of the workshop and drafted the following set of principles that should guide the award of VET professional qualifications. These principles should also inform government policy and practice in this area. The principles are:

1. Teachers have a crucial role in the teaching and learning process, and the VET professional should have parity of esteem and status with others working in the education and training sectors.

2. Teachers should have credible content expertise and practical and relevant experience.

3. Teachers should have relevant skills, knowledge and attributes to help students learn.

4. Elements of a VET teacher qualification should include the fostering of the ability to undertake research and an acknowledgement of the diverse situations that VET teachers work in.

5. Teachers should have a minimum qualification that is issued by an external body. This qualification should focus on both pedagogy and currency. This qualification should be thorough, cross disciplinary and holistic.

6. Teachers should be recognised through a national mechanism of registration and accreditation.

▲ Mixed methods: The third methodological movement

Dr Roslyn Cameron
Southern Cross University

The workshop covered the following topics: Definitions; Historical roots; Terminologies/ Notations; Contentious Issues; Authorities in the field; Purposes; Research designs; The Five Ps Framework for undertaking mixed methods research; and Software. Participants were supplied with a *Bibliographic Starting Kit for Mixed Methods*. Participants particularly enjoyed the debates around paradigmatic stances and mixed methods. Issues relating to epistemological and ontological positioning were discussed. The 16 participants were asked to form small groups and design research from pre-determined research designs for a hypothetical phenomenon. The exercise showed the strength of paradigmatic stances on how research phenomenon is approached and the need to defend methodological choices rigorously.

Interest in mixed methods terminologies, notations, visual depictions and mixed methods typologies also generated interest, as did the array of purposes for engaging in mixed methods and the politics of publishing and applying for funding when utilising mixed methods. During the close of the workshop we discussed the new generation of composite software that allows for the analysis and integration of both qualitative and quantitative data. The Five Ps Framework for engaging in mixed methods was presented as a checklist for what researchers to consider before deciding to engage in a mixed method study.

▲ New researchers in VET: Networking and support; process and content

Dr Ian Robertson
RMIT University

10 AVETRA members with quite diverse research experience attended this workshop. Some participants were at the early stages of postgraduate or funded research, others could be described as experienced VET researchers. Participants' research interests mainly revolved around VET teachers, teacher training and teachers' work; and learners and learning. Specific interests included casual TAFE teachers, Certificate IV TAA, TAFE teachers and their work, VET to HE transition, adults returning to study, work-based learning, informal learning and quality. Participants said they attended to network and share.

The workshop took a relatively informal approach allowing participants to talk about themselves and their research followed by discussion, questions, identification of concerns and possible solutions. To provide an organisational framework for the activity concerns were identified as either content-based or process-based. Participants engaged in this approach with enthusiasm, making facilitation a joy.

Later feedback from participants suggested that the workshop was a most productive activity allowing participants to draw on the experiences and strengths of each other. Relationships were established, confidence was supported and ideas clarified.

To support continued networking and communication, a direct outcome of the activity is the establishment of a 'Research Forum' 'ning' (see http://www.ning.com for further information). This easy to use 'web page' provides a number of functionalities such as an events page and a blog. At this stage, membership is by invitation only but is not meant to be exclusive. If you would like to join, contact Ian at ian.robertson@rmit.edu.au

▲ Scratching around in community: Ethics and practicalities of conducting field-based, mixed method research in diverse adult learning contexts

Associate Professor Barry Golding
University of Ballarat

The workshop, attended by 9 people, was aimed at VET, adult and community education practitioners looking for new ways to collect research data ethically, particularly in mixed-method research. It provided participants with new and practical insights into the opportunities and challenged of ethically collecting and analysing learner-centred data collected in diverse learning contexts.

Barry based the workshop on the wide and deep experiences of collecting data from interviews and surveys on site from a very diverse suite of research in vocational, adult and community settings that are deliberately inclusive of informal learning. The project Barry used for illustrating the research process in the workshop was the NCVER-published 2003 study, *Adult learning through fire and emergency service organisations in small and remote Australian towns* by Christine Hayes, Barry Golding and Jack Harvey. Participants received over 50 pages of notes, taken from existing original documents used to create and publish that study.

The workshop included and explored some problematic (and seldom discussed) practical, logistical, financial, ethical and theoretical considerations associated with VET and ACE research, using real projects, examples, data and research instruments. The workshop presupposed and stressed the importance of ethical and reciprocal conduct at all stages of a research project, going beyond the requirements of university ethics committees.

JOIN AVETRA at:
www.avetra.org.au

Celebrating AVETRA's 12th year