

A MINUTE WITH Erica Smith

I first got interested in VET research when I was working as a TAFE teacher in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I taught unemployed young people on labour market programs, and taught communication skills to pre-apprentices and apprentices. I began to wonder about work placements as I found that our labour market students often faltered when undertaking them. In a previous career as a human resource manager in the retail industry, I had hosted school students on work placements, so I had experience from both sides of the issue. So I decided to research the topic.

Two people who inspired me most to conduct research - Richard Sweet was, at that time, kind enough to talk to me about work placements and to offer me contacts in the 'TRAC' program when I approached him, so that I could build a small research project. TRAC was the forerunner of VET in schools. When I took an academic appointment at Charles Sturt University, where I began as a part-time Associate Lecturer, Doug Hill provided me with great encouragement, finding me a source of funding for a quasi-research project and encouraging me to publish from my TRAC research. As a beginning researcher (at the age of 40 in my first academic appointment), I found it amazing that these senior people were kind enough to help me on my way, and took my ideas seriously. Both people have continued to help me over the years. I know I am not allowed to nominate three people, but I do remember Stephen Billett chairing the session at which I delivered my first conference paper with great sensitivity, making me a bit less scared than I otherwise would have been.

The areas of VET research that interest me most was my PhD, which was completed in 2000, and was on young people's learning from their first year of full-time work. What I learned from the young people led me into two major research areas: apprenticeships and traineeships; and students' part-time working. I have undertaken a series of projects on student part-time working and the way that this has altered the 'school-to-work transition'. In the area of apprenticeships and traineeships I am the co-chair of an international apprenticeship network called INAP (International Network on Innovative Apprenticeship). This group, managed from the University of Bremen, has grown enormously from a small base, and provides a wonderful opportunity for researchers from many countries to share knowledge about apprenticeship policy and practices that benefits not only the scholarly field of knowledge but also policy and practice in their home countries. My research in this area has greatly benefited from NCVET funding. My earlier research in competency-based training has converged with my other, later, research interests, so that I now undertake a lot of research relating to workers gaining qualifications through their jobs. I have also undertaken quite a bit of research in higher education. As the 'tertiary sector' has moved Higher Education and VET closer, this research has been increasingly valuable from a VET point of view, as well as being of interest to me in gaining a deeper understanding of my own field of practice.

Research methodologies I use - I don't have a particular methodological bias, but I probably use qualitative methods more than quantitative. I am not a statistical expert, so my quantitative work is basically confined to descriptive statistics. In most of my major, and sometimes minor, projects, I use both methods. The old saying that quantitative methods are used to find out what is happening, and

qualitative to find out why, rings very true to me. As I have become more experienced I find an increasing weight of obligation to try to represent people's experiences and viewpoints in an accurate and respectful manner. Since becoming an academic I have periods of 'return to (the VET) industry' as a State ITAB manager and an RTO manager, and these wonderful learning experiences have, I believe, added greatly to my research skills and insights.

The most interesting piece of VET research I have conducted - This is a tricky one! I find all of my research interesting. I love to get inside a company and talk to workers and managers about training. I also love talking to people operating at national policy level, as they have so many insights from their vast experience in so many settings. I am constantly surprised by people's generosity with their time and knowledge and their honesty as they talk. I often reflect on my previous projects where completely unexpected findings have overturned my pre-conceptions. Perhaps the piece of research from which I learned most was a mid-1990s national project that I managed, for the then Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET), on the implementation of competency-based training. As a relatively green and junior person, goodness me, did I learn quickly about VET politics! I also learned a great deal from the DEET contact person about how to manage a research project. I think he left DEET to go into horticulture; I am sure he is good at that too! I have benefited from many generous and talented research partners over the years.

Currently I am working on - I am currently managing two Linkage projects funded by the Australian Research Council. These projects are quite long-term; one lasts for three years and the other for two. I have industry partners for both projects, which I find terrific as it helps to keep the research grounded in what's useful and topical. The first examines the skill in jobs traditionally seen as unskilled or low-skilled. The second looks at the training offered by enterprise RTOs. These projects were both bubbling in my mind for years before I gained funding for them and are both areas in which I have a very strong interest, as both relate to the way in which training can improve people's life chances, as well as making an economic contribution.

Another research-related activity is a new 'PhD masterclass' for senior VET managers which I am managing at the University of Ballarat. I am very privileged to be working with nine highly experienced VET people who have decided to undertake doctorates, and the amount of expertise in the room at our first workshop recently was quite astounding.