

A MINUTE WITH Sandra Cotton

Sandra Cotton is the Manager of Disabilities at Polytechnic West (PWA) and has a background in education, training and disability. She holds a Masters in Health Counselling. In 2005 she won a Foggarty Scholarship to complete her Graduate Certificate in Education in Learning Difficulties. Sandra received an NCVET scholarship and was an active member of the Community of Practice (CoP).

I first got interested in VET research during 2008

October VET conference hosted by Dr Llandis Barratt-Pugh. Views expressed at this conference support my conviction that sound practice in training must be underpinned by reliable research.

Two people who inspired me most to conduct research were Llandis Barratt-Pugh and my two consecutive directors at Polytechnic West, Blaire Marsh and Dr Sharee Hogg. Sharee Hogg was also very supportive throughout the process, acting as a critical friend. Most inspiring during the process was my Australian VET Research Association (AVETRA) mentor, Moira Watson. Her encouragement and advice were invaluable.

The area of VET research that interests me most is the re-engagement of those disadvantaged who are often community members with low educational levels and resultant lack of skills. Inclusive training has the potential to offer this group an alternative and a chance of a profession or trade.

Methodology that I have used is a qualitative with mixed methods for data collection. Students participating in the project completed a questionnaire, sometimes with the help of a scribe. Lecturing staff and support workers participated in focus groups and family and other key staff were interviewed.

The most interesting piece of VET research I conducted was as a new researcher with NCVET, investigating the strategies that assist with completion rates of apprentices with a learning disability. Feedback from the staff and students supported my assumption at the outset of the study but shed new light the matter. The level of interest from the staff involved was most encouraging.

Currently I am researching a toolbox of strategies that will assist the industry staff to make reasonable adjustment (supports) for students with disability. This is being carried out with a lecturer seconded from trade training. As a pilot at PWA, it is viewed with interest by other training organizations with intentions to share the finished product.

Source: A-NEWS, The Newsletter of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association, December 2010, pp. 3-4,
<http://avetra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/A-NEWS-NEWSLETTER-DECEMBER-2010-doc.pdf>