

Partners in practice: does the national VET rhetoric connect with reality?

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Abstract

The traditional views of Adult and Community Education (ACE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) are such that the former is seen to be informal for personal and community benefit and the latter is considered to be more formal, accredited training with a vocational/employment outcome in mind. However, there is often an overlap between the two sectors and indeed partnerships often form around the two sectors for specific purposes. A team from Charles Darwin University have conducted a project funded by NCVER that focuses on the ways in which ACE and VET sectors can and do work together for common outcomes in the northern Australian context. The outcomes could be described generally under the banner of ‘community capacity building’, which encompass a broad range of social, economic, and educational objectives—meeting the needs of industries, communities, organisations and individuals. In particular the emphasis of the project is on the impact of and potential for collaboration and cooperation between the two sectors with a particular emphasis on outcomes that result from partnerships formed.

The paper presents findings from one of three sites chosen for the project—the Bowen Basin in Queensland. There is a strong indication that a number of practice principles apply to sustainable VET/ACE partnerships. These relate to leadership, the nature of relationships and partner roles, resourcing of programs. Partnerships also need to take into account the context in which they work. This is not just a ‘good news story’ but rather illustrates, using specific case examples, how collaboration between VET and community/government/industry partners either succeed or fail depending on the nature of the partnerships.

Introduction

The traditional views of Adult and Community Education (ACE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) are such that the former is seen to be non-formal for personal and community benefit and the latter is considered to be more formal, accredited training with a vocational/employment outcome in mind. However, there is often an overlap between the two sectors and indeed partnerships often form around the two sectors for specific purposes.

This paper is based on results of a project funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) called ‘VET/ACE connections in northern Australia: Pathways for common outcomes’. It is being conducted by a team from Charles Darwin University and focuses on the ways in which ACE and VET sectors can and do work together for common outcomes in the northern Australian context. The research focussed on three regions with distinctive characteristics: the central Australian desert region of the Northern Territory, the Kakadu region of West Arnhem Land and the Bowen Basin region of central Queensland. The main emphasis of the project is on the impact of and potential for collaboration and cooperation between the two sectors with a related focus on outcomes that result from partnerships

formed. Results from one of the sites, the Bowen Basin, are presented and discussed. The focus of the paper is on practice principles that emerge from an analysis of interviews with VET/ACE partnership stakeholders. Implications and conclusions are drawn from the nature of the partnerships and the practice principles.

Literature

As noted in the introduction, the traditional views of ACE and VET are such that the former is seen to be non-formal, essentially non-institutional and for personal and community benefit, while the latter is considered to be more formal, institutional, accredited training with a vocational/employment outcome in mind. The distinctions between ‘non-formal’, ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ may be important to help our understanding of the apparent differences between distinct ACE and VET ‘sectors’. Some prefer not to distinguish between informal and non-formal. For example, Colley et al. (2003:viii) conclude that: ‘There is no clear difference between informal and non-formal learning. The terms are used interchangeably...’. However, others argue differently suggesting that ‘non-formal’ learning is structured, intentional and officially recognised, while ‘informal’ learning is incidental, unstructured and officially not recognised (e.g. European Commission 2001; OECD 2003).

In terms of the defined sectors then, ACE tends to align more closely with non-formal learning and VET with formal learning. Boundaries between the two sectors, however, are becoming blurred or contested (Chapman et al. 2001). Birch et al. (2003), commenting on the ACE sector, state that ‘An increasing trend is the provision of distinctly vocational and accredited training, so-called VET ACE, which now accounts for half of reported ACE’ (p. 44).

Defining ACE and VET

Knight and Nestor (2000) define ACE as ‘intended principally for adults, including general, vocational, basic and community education, and recreation, leisure and personal enrichment programs’. It is thus a response to the lifelong learning needs of the community (DECS ACT 2005)—a fourth sector of education, with schools, higher education and VET being the other three. The defining characteristics of ACE include: easy access and flexible participation; consumer-driven and learner-centred classes and courses; a wide variety of learning in areas ranging from self-improvement, general education, leisure, personal and community development, employment skills and preparation for vocational education and training; and a second chance role (Golding, Davies & Volkoff 2001; DECS ACT 2005).

Many ACE providers offer vocational education and training both as non-formal and as accredited courses, with some ACE providers being Registered Training Organisations (Hawke et al. 2002). According to NCVER (2003), approximately three quarters of the nearly 21,000 hours delivered as ACE in 2001 were vocational in nature. ACE is therefore a significant part of the Australian Training System (Commonwealth of Australia 2005; NCVER 2001).

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA 2004) defines vocational education and training as:

post-compulsory education and training, excluding degree and higher level programs delivered by higher education institutions, which provides people with

occupational or work-related knowledge and skills. VET also includes programs which provide the basis for subsequent vocational programs.

The mission statement of the national VET system is ‘to ensure that the skills of the Australian labour force are sufficient to support internationally competitive commerce and industry and to provide individuals with opportunities to optimise their potential’ (ANTA 1998).

VET/ACE partnerships: Why do they form?

Cross-sectoral partnerships between educational institutions, employers, community bodies and local education authorities are sometimes formed in order to address local labour market needs. In the United Kingdom, for example, the British Lifelong Learning partnerships and Learning and Skills Councils coordinate training across adult, community education and post-school sectors (Kearns & Papadopoulos 2000). Some ACE providers operate in partnership with schools, co-delivering programs with schools to ensure students stay engaged in the learning process (Dunn & Joseph 2004). The purpose and origin of the partnerships, which may be the result of community led or external drivers (Billett et al. 2005) to a large extent determines the development and outcomes of the partnership (Kilpatrick & Guenther 2003). VET/ACE collaborations in northern Australia are entirely consistent with the various models discussed above.

The linkages that exist between ACE and VET remain sporadic (Wheelahan 2000). Partnerships and collaborative arrangements between schools, VET and ACE providers are advocated in order to address the general and vocational needs of school students enrolled in applied learning and vocational education courses (Henry & Grundy 2004). Kearns (2004) notes increasingly active collaboration between education sectors in Australia, ‘with adult and community education, schools, VET, and universities collaborating and contributing [and] learning brokers active in building partnership and collaboration’ (p. 17).

Bowen Basin context

The Bowen Basin is located in central Queensland in an area extending from the south of Emerald to the north of Moranbah. The main service centres for the region are Mackay and Rockhampton. Economically the region is driven primarily by coal mining but it is historically an agricultural area, predominantly cattle and to a lesser extent horticulture, sheep and dairy (CQANM 2002). Formal training in the region is largely driven by the needs of the coal mining industry and allied industries (notably energy), which are reportedly experiencing skills shortages (CQRPAC 2002). The non-formal/community based/adult learning sector is driven also to some extent by the needs of industry, which funds community based learning initiatives partly in order to make mining communities more liveable (e.g. BMA 2004; CSRM 2005).

Project methodology

The research on which this project is based relies on a mixed methods or mixed models approach (Creswell 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998), drawing on publicly available statistical data to provide informing contextual background, data collected on-site in the form of semi-structured interviews, and data collected on-site in the

form of additional literature and locally relevant documents. The findings presented here are drawn primarily from the results of the semi-structured interviews conducted on-site, but informed by the relevant quantitative data collected throughout the project. The quantitative–qualitative sequence follows Creswell’s (2003:215) ‘sequential explanatory strategy’, characterised by ‘the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data’. While Creswell suggests that the priority for this strategy is typically given to the quantitative data, in the case of this research, the emphasis is on the qualitative study. The study fits a model described by Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998:44) as ‘Quantitative methods to enlarge on qualitative study’.

The project proposal indicated that three case study sites would be used for the research: the Bowen Basin area of central Queensland, the central Australian region of the Northern Territory and the Kakadu region of West Arnhem Land, also in the Northern Territory. This paper reports on findings drawn from the Bowen Basin site. A minimum of 12 interviews were to be conducted at each site with key stakeholder groups identified in the proposal. Sample selection follows a ‘purposeful’ or ‘purposive’ sampling strategy (Patton 2002:230). The focus of this paper is a set of findings relating to one of the project research questions: What can existing/emerging VET/ACE providers do to increase the probability of successful socio-economic outcomes?

Stakeholder groups identified as potential participants in the Bowen Basin site included TAFE representatives, community development officers, mining industry representatives, providers with an ACE focus, schools, regional development groups, and other organisations where learning partnerships were involved. In all, 13 interviews were conducted at the Bowen Basin site. Interviews were conducted in several locations including Rockhampton, Emerald, Dysart, Middlemount and Yeppoon. Face to face interviews were conducted in the week commencing 12 September 2005. Each interview ran for approximately 30-40 minutes and was recorded for later transcription. Transcribed texts were analysed with NVivo2™ using a coding framework agreed to for each site.

Findings and discussion: partnerships and practice principles

The findings presented here relate to practice principles for VET and ACE partnerships identified in the Bowen Basin. While one of the purposes of the research questions was to identify factors that contribute to success of partnerships, respondents offered comments on successes and failures of partnerships. The findings presented here show only the most frequently identified issues.

The nature of VET/ACE partnerships in the Bowen Basin

Table 1 shows partnerships reviewed in the Bowen Basin site as part of the VET/ACE connections project. The table demonstrates the diversity of stakeholders and purposes of the partnerships. None of the partnerships could be described as being driven by a desire by VET or ACE providers to work together to achieve joint goals. However, each of the partnerships involves elements that bring together VET and ACE stakeholders to varying degrees.

Table 1. Bowen Basin partnerships reviewed as part of the VET/ACE connections project

Program name	Main partner organisations*
Upskilling the Highlands III	Central Highlands Development Corporation (CHDC)** ; Queensland Government Department of Employment and Training
Community Partnerships Program	BHP Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) ; Learning Network Queensland; Education Queensland; Dysart Youth Training Centre
Central Queensland A New Millennium (education, training and research strategies)	Queensland Government Departments of Local Government and Planning and Employment and Training; Commerce Queensland, community organisations, industry organisations and associations
Freshstart	Central Highlands Development Corporation ; Education Queensland; TAFE; Education Training and Reforms for the Future Emerald District Youth Advisory Taskforce
Rockhampton Regional Development Limited	Queensland Department of State Development, Trade and Innovation ; Central Queensland University; Shires of Rockhampton City, Livingstone, Mt Morgan, Fitzroy
CTM Support Network Inc.	Broadsound Shire Council; Peak Downs Shire Council; Queensland Department of Communities
Learning Network Queensland (includes centres in the Bowen Basin region at Blackwater, Dysart, Capricorn Coast, Moronbah, Mt Morgan and Rockhampton)	Several universities; Open Learning Institute of TAFE and other TAFE campuses; local shires; Queensland Department of Employment and Training; Queensland Department of Education and the Arts—Office of Higher Education, BMA
BMA Central Highlands Learning Development Centre (LDC)	BMA , Education Queensland, local schools; Griffith University.

* Lead/funding agencies are shown in bold

**CHDC is itself a partnership funded by Bauhinia, Emerald, Jericho, Duarina and Peak Downs Shires

If the various partner roles are described in terms of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities, a full array of permutations and combinations of these are represented in the partnerships. For example, the BMA Central Highlands Learning Development Centre (LDC) involves partners that are primarily engaged in formal learning activities with school students through Education Queensland, non-formal activities through the professional development activities of teachers by the cluster and informal learnings that occur incidentally as a result of the parent-teacher relationships that develop. Variations of this type of scenario are repeated in almost all the partnerships.

Taking into account the partnership context

Most respondents prefaced their discussion about ‘what works’ with an acknowledgement of the importance of local and regional context. An understanding of the historical context was considered particularly important for many respondents. This historical context had a political, social and economic dimension to it. Several respondents commented on the importance of understanding and being responsive to the local and regional historical context. One respondent with several years experience working in community based programs prefaced her remarks about partnerships in the region as follows:

So the understanding of the history has always helped, I think, and the changing nature of the social and the economic climates around the regions is important.

For those reliant on government funding, working with departments and their bureaucracies presented its own challenges. Several respondents gave examples of how attempts to form and develop partnerships were stymied because of ‘internal politics’, strict adherence to rules or a desire to ‘protect a patch of territory’. These challenges then formed part of the contextual reality in which organisations worked.

For example, one (predominantly ACE) training provider described her attempts to form partnerships with a TAFE provider:

...they say they want to partner but then again its internal politics and fiefdom type stuff that prevents things from happening.

Partner relationships

The most important factor contributing to the effectiveness of partnerships was described in terms of relationships. Every respondent suggested ways in which partnerships were impacted by relationships in some way or another. For some, relationships were also described in terms of trust, honesty and mutual benefit. For others it was about communication. Often the issues of trust, communication and 'working for a common purpose' were linked together in the same sentence. Most respondents indicated that they relied on the relationships ahead of structure.

One respondent, involved as a training broker in several community linkages described the way she made her various community partnerships work for her. She went on to describe how she actively worked to build those relationships as a means of achieving her desired outcomes.

The relationships are everything to me. I suppose it's about building the relationships and the trust.

Even in contexts where relationship building was not an intentional activity, the importance of interdependent, mutually beneficial relationships was still evident. Commenting on the success of a mining company–community partnership with several training/learning components, a community development officer's comments about these relationships, highlights another aspect of the importance of pre-existing trust in a community.

In a small community [partners work together] because they depend on each other. You are in contact with each other all the time, you know what's going on and you help each other in the community.

It is evident that much of the learning that occurs in and through partnerships is informal. Learning is implicit in the above quote in several ways. The reason that people 'know what's going on' is because of the 'contact', the way people depend on each other and the way they help each other. Further, it could be argued that these informal learnings support other formal and non-formal learning activity. For example, an ACE partner described the incidental learnings that occurred as a 70 year old man overcame isolation and potential mental health problems, She commented that these learnings are 'not quantifiable in the government sense'.

Trust was seen to be both an ingredient of a successful partnership (see earlier quote) and an outcome. The following quote from a regional development representative in Emerald was the first 'outcome' to be identified.

I suppose there is an intrinsic outcome, which is the trust.

He went on to say that over a five-year timeframe the results of the organisation spoke for themselves and this gave the funding body confidence to continue funding through

to a third iteration of a particular partnership program. While the examples given here have been mainly positive, respondents reported negative experiences of relationships and broken trust that worked against partnerships.

Resourcing

There was a general consensus that the level of funding was not an issue. Many respondents alluded to the relative wealth of resources in the region and recipients of funds from mining companies commented favourably about their access to funding over the long term. However, those with experience of trying to access government funding for training/learning programs expressed some concern about having to meet strict or changing funding criteria and dealing with bureaucracy. A quote from an ACE provider highlights this issue:

They've rearranged their funding packages and now they've got one that's more employment outcome oriented and so it's very difficult and it is not just us as a lot of other organisations that won't take on those projects.

Three of the eight VET/ACE partnerships explored in the Bowen Basin involved a mining company, which funded community oriented programs. The other partners included schools, a recognised ACE provider and a community-based youth training centre. In each case the mining company had provided sustained and long term support for the partner organisations. There was wide acknowledgement from the partners that this resourcing was essential for the sustainability of programs.

Resourcing was not just about funding. One of the recurring themes that most respondents spoke about related to the importance of getting the right people to do the tasks of the partnership. The following quote from a TAFE representative reflects this view:

Most of those programs are pretty dependent on one or two key staff. They only support one or two staff directly and it depends on the quality of those staff as to how successful they are.

These 'quite talented staff' referred to in the above quote were also recognised for their worth by the regional development organisation that employed them. The manager of the organisation clearly identified these people as a strength of the organisation in the following quote:

We've just got great quality people. They are hard to come by. They are really high-level professionals. They are autonomous; they are passionate about what they do.

There were some who suggested that finding people to fill key positions was a major concern—attracting people to a regional area with the right mix of skills was identified as a key issue. The quote above points to the problem that quality people are 'hard to come by'.

Leadership

Most respondents described the importance of leadership in making partnerships effective. Leaders were variously described as 'community champions', 'drivers',

‘proactive’, ‘advocates’, ‘visionary’, ‘opening doors’, and ‘making stuff happen’. These words—used by respondents—describe the importance of leadership in terms of function.

Two types of leaders emerged from the interviews: those who were leaders of the partnership and those who were leaders of the partner organisations. The former tended to act as brokers for the partners. The latter tended to be community networkers and local ‘shakers and movers’. The broker tended to draw in resources for the partnership while the networker tended to make good use of those resources. The broker was also more of a big picture person, putting forward ideas and concepts. One of these leaders described his role in the following way:

I think the reality is that the leader drives it a fair bit so I will be batting up a lot of issues in concepts and ideas and suggestions to the board and to other community groups and industry all the time.

Another respondent described a different leader’s role as a motivator—one who helped other people see the opportunities:

And he has driven an agenda of partnerships and looking for those opportunities, a real opportunist is this guy. You have to run behind him with a fan and hose because of the fire lighting that goes on but he certainly I feel stirred a lot of people into seeing opportunities other than just apprenticeships.

The latter group is described by a mining company representative as people who get successful results:

So our programs would not be a success if it wasn’t for those leaders... just about every one of our community leaders—we funded them in many respects. You meet them everywhere. I meet them all the time.

Both of these leadership roles were seen to be strategically important for the direction of the partnership on the one hand and the implementation of the partnerships goals on the other.

Five implications arising

Five implications arising out of the practice principles are now presented. Some discussion under each implication heading is also offered.

Implication 1: The research confirms the contention of the literature review that the boundaries between VET and ACE are indeed blurring.

The Bowen Basin site’s partnerships demonstrated that VET providers are involved in what might be considered ACE provision and vice versa. In some cases the ACE training was a precursor to more formalised training. In other cases it was an adjunct to accredited training. The trend is also being driven by the realities of local contexts, such that skills shortages mean that there is an increasing need to re-engage those not in the workforce into employment.

Implication 2: Also confirming the literature, most funding resources for VET/ACE partnerships are coming from VET oriented funding regimes with vocational criteria attached.

Regardless of the form, the ‘bucket of money’ from which partnerships drew their financial resources had a vocational priority. The more ‘ACE’ oriented partnerships indicated that in order to survive they were often forced to provide training with a vocational pathway or outcome. Conversely, some of the more VET oriented providers, such as TAFE indicated that in order to meet the foundational needs and underpinning skills of some of the partnerships’ client groups.

Implication 3: The impetus for cooperation between the VET and ‘ACE’ providers is not coming from either of these groups. Rather partnerships are drawing in the required VET and ACE resources as needed.

The evidence from the Bowen Basin suggests that VET and ACE providers do not naturally come together. Indeed there was potentially some tension between the two sectors, competing for the same bucket of funding, and in the case of TAFE, trying to make the most of their human resources and physical infrastructure. The nature of the partnerships reviewed suggests that the impetus for connections is coming from industry, government and regional development organisations because of the imperative for vocational outcomes (see Implication 1).

Implication 4 A key ingredient and outcome of effective partnerships appears to be ‘trust’. This reflects the longevity and sustainability of the partnership, but is something that can be actively built.

Within the context of relationship building, ‘trust’ was identified as both an outcome and an ingredient of effective VET/ACE partnerships. For most respondents it was more important than formal agreements as a factor contributing to partnerships’ effectiveness. The findings suggest that this important aspect of partner relationships is something that leaders can intentionally foster to help achieve their goals. As an outcome, ‘trust’ is both an indicator of the longevity of the relationship and a factor that contributes to the incremental development and sustainability (particularly in terms of resourcing) of the partnership. The trust—and therefore partnership sustainability—is jeopardised however when trusted people are removed from the partnership or when partners place greater importance on bureaucratic process (e.g. sticking to rules and regulations) than on relationships. The trust that is built up between stakeholders of the partnerships also undergirds informal learnings that occur unintentionally, outside the expected or prescribed outcomes of the partnership.

Implication 5 Despite the relative strength of the region, partnerships are still vulnerable. These vulnerabilities are related mainly to human resources and dealing with bureaucracies.

While the region was considered to be well-resourced, accessing and using resources strategically was considered to be important. A reliance on the wealth generated by the mining industry does add some vulnerability to the region—and was noted as an issue during the downturn of 2000-2001—but the key issue for resourcing at this time was identified as accessing the right people to do the tasks of partnerships. This is at least in part related to the relatively high mobility of the population and skills shortages. Conflict among personalities was identified as one thing that worked against some partnership outcomes, undermining trust.

Conclusions

Evidence from the Bowen Basin site presents a picture of a well-resourced learning environment with several examples of different ways that vocational and community oriented learning/training organisations work together for the good of the community and the region as a whole. The impetus for ACE/VET collaboration does not generally come from the training organisations themselves. Government, industry and regional development agencies are at the forefront of partnerships. Their agendas are not exclusively related to training but they demand a mix of learnings (formal and non-formal) that meet needs related primarily to the skills demands (particularly skills shortages) of the region. It is within this context that VET and ACE providers come together in the Bowen Basin region. In this case, if we see that the national VET rhetoric is about meeting skills needs for industry and regions then there is a strong connection between the rhetoric and reality. However, the results also point to the underpinning importance of trust and partner relationships without which the intended outcomes would be difficult to achieve. It would appear that much of the success described in the partnerships reviewed here is attributable to the trust and the concordant—though officially unrecognised—informal learnings that develop between the partner stakeholders.

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