

# Starting from scratch: teacher to researcher and back again

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NATIONAL CENTRE FOR  
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH  
CONFERENCE PAPER





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## National VET Research Conference (No Frills) 2011 keynote address

Berwyn Clayton

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The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is an independent body responsible for collecting, managing and analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training (VET).

NCVER's in-house research and evaluation program undertakes projects which are strategic to the VET sector. These projects are developed and conducted by NCVER's research staff and are funded by NCVER. This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector.

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# About the research

## *Starting from scratch: teacher to researcher and back again* *National VET Research Conference 2011 keynote address*

Berwyn Clayton, Victoria University

Berwyn Clayton has been involved in the VET sector for over 25 years. After beginning her career as a teacher, Berwyn became a pioneer in promoting the value of research. With a record of over 30 publications and 25 conference papers or journal articles, Berwyn has created an impressive body of knowledge, particularly in areas such as assessment and the capability of the VET workforce. Berwyn is also dedicated to supporting and mentoring new researchers, in particular those who were formerly VET practitioners, as she was. Berwyn is currently the Director of the Work-based Education Research Centre (WERC) at Victoria University.

It was these attributes that saw Berwyn named VET Researcher of the Year, and give a keynote speech at the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's 2011 National VET Research Conference (No Frills). This speech provides an insight into Berwyn's journey into VET research and demonstrates her hallmark presentation style using pictures (chosen for their amusing as well as didactic impact) to guide us through the story. Her messages are directed at practitioner researchers.

## Key messages

- Research can help practitioners to find solutions to persistent problems – the itches that irritate them at work – or at least help them to better understand the issues.
- Researchers need consciously to go beyond their comfort zone and look impartially at issues from a different perspective, including that of their potential audiences.
- Practitioner researchers need to seek out mentors and they need to ensure they find the time to write up their work, so that it has a chance to influence practice beyond their immediate circle. That influence may take many years to be felt.
- Practitioner researchers should be prepared to cope with adverse reactions to – and sometimes misuse of – research findings.

Tom Karmel  
Managing Director, NCVET

# Starting from scratch

## Teacher to researcher and back again

Berwyn Clayton  
Victoria University

When I was first asked to do this presentation, I gave absolutely no thought to what I might talk about. Then the suggestion came from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) that perhaps I could provide some insights into my personal journey into VET research, so I put the abstract together (again with no clear idea of how I might tackle this). As usual, my immediate thought was the title – not the content.

The idea of ‘starting from scratch’ came to me, and I found this quote from the 1842 novel *Andy Pandy* by Samuel Lover that really connected:

When once the itch of literature comes over a man, nothing can cure it but the scratching of a pen. But if you have not a pen, I suppose you must scratch any way you can ...

For me, I have had a constant itch, and research has been my major means of scratching.

It started  
with an  
itch...



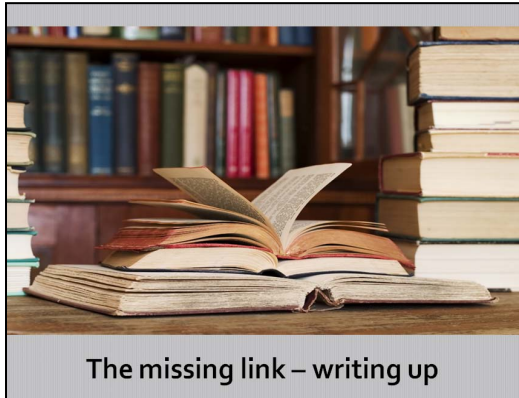
I fell into VET research simply by trying to find a solution to a puzzling problem in my day-to-day work in TAFE (technical and further education).

Inevitably, my journey has been about trying to find a missing piece, different ways of doing things or – when a solution was not clearly evident – at least gaining a handle on why things are the way they are.





This work required significant scratching for a number years. I was working with student support staff and subject discipline teachers to ensure better outcomes, and if it moved, I tested it! All while still being paid for 12 hours a week and working 35! Ah, the life of the casual teacher in TAFE! Needless to say, we were able to demonstrate major improvements in student progression and, ultimately, completion.



My greatest regret is that I never had the opportunity to write up what proved to be a wonderful and significant longitudinal research study. This is a valuable lesson that all practitioner researchers in VET really need to learn. Taking the time to write up our findings provides an evidence base for action and a possible opportunity to influence, even if it is many years later.

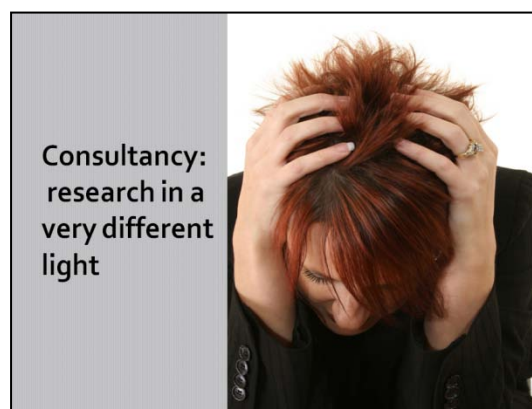
This early work has stood me in good stead and the knowledge gained in the 1980s applies equally in today's VET – because the very same issues about student success remain an itch, worthy of considerable scratching on all our parts.



By 1989 I had moved into the curriculum area in the amalgamated ACT Institute of TAFE. A review of the Year 10 Adult Basic Education Program again focused our attention on student success, as did a study on work which examined the student access and selection processes being applied in other TAFE institutes. In both instances, the research was used to inform policy and curriculum change at a micro level.

Then came my first experience with externally funded research. In this case it was somebody else's itch that needed scratching.

The ACT Government's Office of Industry Development commissioned me to undertake a review of their Workers' Compensation Rebate Scheme. This scheme, which began in April 1987, was designed to be an incentive to private sector employers in the ACT to employ first-year apprentices and trainees. It involved reimbursement of the initial workers' compensation premiums paid by employers for their first-year apprentices and trainees. Despite the review finding that the 120 employers I interviewed agreed that the scheme was an incentive, particularly for those whose workers' compensation rates were high, such as in construction, the government chose to close the program and had, apparently, always intended to do so.





I learned two critical things from this project:

- Firstly, that research can often be used for quite different purposes from those assumed by the researcher, and the findings ignored!
- Secondly, and probably most importantly, that there is great value to be gained by stepping out of your comfort zone – from your teacher/trainer's shoes and into the shoes of employers and bureaucrats. That way you get a very different view of the world of VET.



My next externally funded project came through the auspices of the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development, the forerunner of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. I was awarded the princely sum of \$5000 to undertake seed research on the topic of 'work education' – this was in 1989 – prior to the advent of competency standards and their associated paraphernalia.

The study, which took over six months to complete, reviewed the existing provision of, and future need for, 'work education' in initial vocational courses offered by TAFE in the ACT.

In this weighty unpublished tome of 135 pages, I defined work education in the following way: the broad-based knowledge, skills and attitudes that students require to seek and retain employment, plan careers and understand the legal, economic and social norms and practices of the workplace.

Further, I suggested, work education should be designed to provide students with a context for their training and *enlighten* them about their working environment and their rights and responsibilities to enable them to participate effectively in the workplace.

Amongst the 18 recommendations were a number of very insightful propositions:

For example, I suggested:

- When initial vocational courses are revised or developed, they must include appropriate components of work education.
- The objectives of the work education component should be clearly delineated as part of the formal curriculum and not left to the discretion of teachers as part of their informal curriculum – and rightly so too!
- Under teaching strategies, I recommended that, where possible, field placements and work experience be included as an integral part of the assessable program and that such work experiences have appropriate objectives and be negotiated in consultation with employer organisations and the unions, as well as with individual enterprises – all very novel suggestions for the time.

Many of these recommendations were implemented in the institute through a new policy on work education. This was not a popular piece of work with my teaching colleagues, for what I thought were good ideas left them with potentially very sore backs. But, interestingly, I was not the only one who thought that work education might be a very good idea, and, with the arrival of the Training Reform Agenda during the 1990s, many teachers allowed me to return from Coventry.

In 1992, I won my first real competitive grant from the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development. The project, Predictors of Success in TAFE Courses, was again concerned with what was proving to be my favourite topic – student access, retention, attrition and completion. This mixed methods study compared the entry characteristics of TAFE students who successfully completed their courses with those of TAFE students who did not graduate. Our goal was to determine whether there were any identifiable on-entry indicators for successful completion. Not surprisingly, good Year 12 results was a reasonable predictor of success, particularly for young students, while for the mature-aged the additional years of work and worldly experience they had behind them were influential in their being successful in their programs.

On the basis of the findings from this research, our organisation modified its entry requirements and selection process. The impact of these changes on student progression and completion soon became evident.

On this project I was aligned with a wonderful mentor – Peter Thomson – the deputy at the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development. The importance of having an experienced other such as Peter to guide me when I first embarked on such an ambitious journey proved to be a critical factor for me. He was on the phone whenever needed, and his feedback was timely, relevant and inevitably wise. While there is some suggestion that you cannot teach an old dog new tricks, an old dog can certainly teach a new pup many.



Something worthy of considerable scratching - assessment

In 1994–95 I picked up an NCVET project when a colleague was unable to complete it. Hugh Guthrie from NCVET assured me that all I had to do was write a simple text on competency-based assessment – now how hard would that be? After a long and intense struggle getting the concepts together in my head, *Focusing on assessment: strategies for off-job teachers and trainers* was published in 1995. It is my understanding that it sold quite a number of copies and all of a sudden I was very busy talking and teaching about, and undertaking research into, what has

probably been the greatest breakout of itchiness across the sector – competency-based assessment and recognition of prior learning. *Certainly a topic that we have dined out on over the years and may do so for a few years more.*

Between 1995 and 2004 I was involved in 11 research and development projects in this area and worked with practitioners and policy-makers around the country on trying to improve assessment practice.



During this time I worked with Peter Thomson, Andrea Bateman, Robin Booth, Sue Roy, Dave Rumsey, Russell Docking, Jo Hargreaves, Kaye Bowman, Rob Stowell and others: all of us busily working away at competency-based assessment. Sharing the findings of my research with others in this important field kept me constantly in contact with my profession and reminded me that I was a practitioner researcher – not only a researcher. This confirmed in me that I was most comfortable when what I was scratching about was grounded in day-to-day VET practice.

While undertaking national research projects has always been of considerable importance to me personally, I have also recognised one very important fact. If I am unable, as a researcher, to prove the value of the research to the organisation that employs me, the likelihood of continued support for any form of research may well be in jeopardy.

National research must have the potential to be relevant and useful at a local level – it must highlight problems and produce solutions. The power of such work cannot be understated.

As an example, between 1994 and 1998, over 40 action research projects on assessment were undertaken by teachers in the Canberra Institute of Technology. Supported by small amounts of seed funding, these projects ranged from developing more effective assessment tools and information for learners, to evaluating new approaches to assessment and researching alternative strategies to improve assessment practice.

Teachers identified what they considered to be an important issue, they generated concept proposals, they carried out the research work and they presented their findings to their peers. The approach acknowledged what we all know to be true, that individual teachers are more likely to accept and implement better practice when they are given the opportunity to actively participate in the research, development and decision-making processes. From the 15 initial projects, the ripple effect was significant, with approximately 200 teachers working away at competency-based assessment.

As John Elliott (1985)<sup>1</sup> suggests:

The more individuals share what they have learned with each other, the more the common stock of professional knowledge is extended and enriched. And the more this common stock is developed in response to the changing contexts of professional practice, the greater is the individual's capacity to diagnose the problem situations encountered and to respond appropriately.

What a wonderful mantra for VET and VET research.

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<sup>1</sup> Elliott, J 1985, 'Educational action-research', *World yearbook of education 1985: research, policy and practice*, (eds) J Nisbet, J Megarry & S Nisbet, Kogan Page, London, p.214.



Beyond assessment, I began to develop a more voracious itch and this was the one concerned with the VET workforce and its development needs. Research projects such as *Shifting mindsets*, funded by the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation Program and led by another wonderful mentor, Roger Harris, and a teaching and learning strategies scoping project *Doing it well, doing it better*, funded by the former Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), revealed stories about lots of good practice, but also areas of concern, where the neglect of practitioner skills development was impacting upon the quality of VET outcomes.

And when *Sustaining the skillbase of TAFE institutes*, a project undertaken by the team at the Centre for Undertaking Research in Vocational Education, was published in 2005, I learned very quickly that a consistent message is not necessarily appreciated by all. On the report's release, the minister's office rang to ask a few seemingly innocent questions. Shortly thereafter a press release from the minister commented quite negatively on the state of technical currency and teaching practice in the sector. I came to understand that, at times, research findings can be greeted by brickbats rather than bouquets.

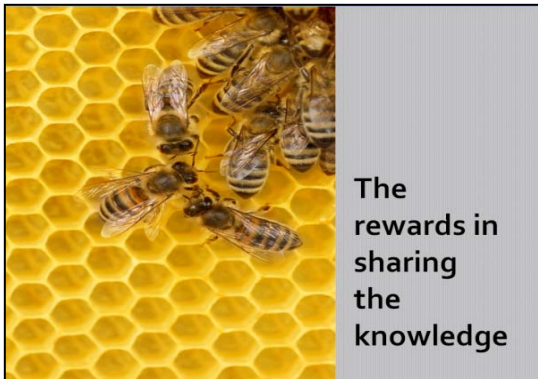


In this instance, my mood was not improved by the fact that I could see the big house on the hill from my office window – a constant reminder of the unexpected backlash from a government minister who found the research findings not in line with his current thinking. I suppose I should have been happy that some notice was being taken of the research, something that is not always the case, unfortunately.

Eventually the pain went away and a new project brought hope and refreshed enthusiasm. *Supporting VET providers in building capability for the future* was a national three-year consortium research program funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and managed by NCVET. The consortium drew together a powerful research team from across the country and was led by Roger Harris and included Clive Chappell, Victor Callan, John Mitchell, Michele Simons, Geoff Hawke, and Andy Smith and other associate researchers within universities and VET providers. With a focus on the critical issues relating to registered training organisations, such as leadership and management, human resources practice, careers in VET, learning through work, workforce development, and my own personal favourite –



the structures and cultures in registered training organisations – the body of work produced by the consortium was a mighty one. It has been used as a resource to underpin the development of new policies on workforce development in a number of states and territories. It has also been actively utilised in major government reports such as the recent Skills Australia report and the Productivity Commission report and it forms a significant learning resource for university undergraduate and postgraduate courses in vocational education, leadership and management and organisational development across Australia, demonstrating the breadth of what is possible in the VET research world.

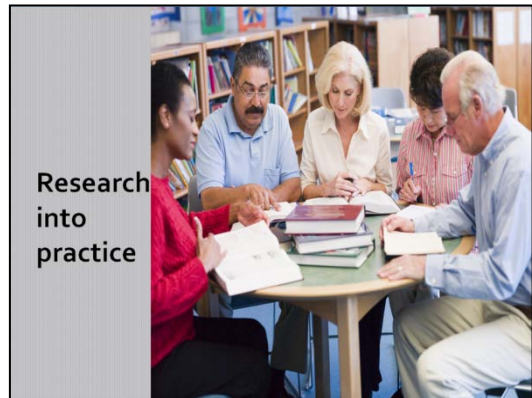


From the very beginning we made the very wise decision to actively engage with registered training organisations and practitioners throughout the life of the consortium program. In total, 95 registered training organisations across all states and territories were involved in the research, and participants in the nine research activities had the opportunity to shape the research, to test the ideas being presented, and to provide the research team with feedback on the relevance and value of the research outcomes.

Through this process, both the research work and the researchers became highly visible, and the outcomes were in the public arena for all to see, test and apply. Apart from many publications, a well-populated website and regular newsletters, researchers presented keynote addresses and workshops at 67 events across the country, attended by almost 5000 participants. The outcomes of the consortium work make it clear that any effort that researchers dedicate to making real contact with potential end-users of their research will not go astray – and there is always the potential to influence policy and inform practice.

While I continue to research, I am also continuing to teach – it is a never-ending cycle for me, with each activity nurturing the other.

That is why this conference is so important: No Frills has provided so many of us with a platform to put our ideas forward, to step off into VET research and to get together with others working in areas of common interest, making connections with people over the issues and questions relating to the work they do in VET, worthy areas for much closer examination.



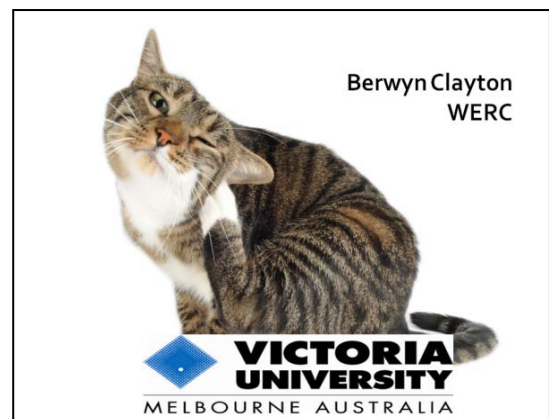
I always come to No Frills because my urge to scratch away at burning VET issues remains with me, and inevitably a new irritation arises that I cannot ignore without having a crack at finding some form of healing balm. My goal now is to encourage others to step up and join me in this task, as surely there is plenty of investigation to be done.

If you are not already a practitioner researcher, consider joining what is a vibrant VET research community, for the rewards are many.

As some wise but unknown person stated:



You too can start from scratch, just as I did. Thank you.





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