

## From a novice researcher

by Steven Hodge

I am new to research in VET, so a good question is what can I possibly contribute to the development of new researchers in this area? I cannot offer the wisdom that comes from years of organising and conducting research projects or countless hours devoted to the creation of new knowledge about VET. But I can give you this one assurance: that VET research in Australia welcomes a very broad range of perspectives, backgrounds and interests to the great work of understanding vocational education in all its forms, dimensions and ramifications.

There is good reason to believe me, and that is because vocational education connects with some of the most central and important activities of life: working and learning. It goes without saying that we all work and we all learn and we all spend a lot of time learning from work, in work and to work. Our work – whatever it might be – goes to the core of who we are and our relationships. When we meet someone for the first time one of the most common questions is ‘What do you do?’ When we think about our friendships and loves and hates, our work will often be the ground from which they spring. Whether we enjoy or detest our work, it is with us at some level at all times. The work we have done in the past has shaped us in countless ways and the work we might do is ever the stage of our hopes and fears, presenting a powerful challenge to our imagination and ability to plan. And at every turn we learn: we learn from work, we learn about ourselves through work and our next steps in work will be stumbles or strides depending on the learning we embrace.

At the same time, work and learning are great focuses of debate in our society. Politicians, bureaucrats, industry leaders and researchers of all stripes have much to say about the work we do or should do and the learning necessary to do it all. Work and learning are preoccupations of policy, law and regulation while commentators and futurists offer a continuous stream of advice, warnings and visions about our occupations and prosperity (or lack of it) to come. I am reminded at this point of a favourite metaphor of my mentor and friend Roger Harris – a renowned VET researcher – who talks of a pendulum swinging between fixation on the economic significance of VET and interest in its human and social significance. The importance I have tried to show so far has emphasised these two poles: the human significance and the economic relevance of vocational education. But no matter where the pendulum happens to be situated in its arc, learning, work and learning from, in and for work are vital, enduring issues for our individual and collective life.

So vocational education is important. It also bristles with questions. Whether you are an economist or policy maker trying to make VET more productive or whether you are interested in the processes of learning or the way identity and work entwine, you will encounter gaps in knowledge that infuse your reflections, plans and theories with uncertainty. To extend and deepen our understanding of vocational education and its contexts is the mission of VET research. Based on what has been said already, it is clear that this mission must be a multi-faceted one, and that addressing the wide range of gaps in our knowledge about vocational education will demand diverse perspectives, expertise and

experience. Could it be that VET research calls for the greatest diversity of all research enterprises?

My early experience of the Australian VET research community confirms that it is in reality diverse and welcomes diverse perspectives. Naturally, there are fashions and factions in this community, but at any gathering of VET researchers and in any sampling of their work you will find evidence of a sometimes bewildering array of perspectives, backgrounds and interests. That this community is diverse and welcomes diverse perspectives is confirmed by my own reception by the community. My first research project in VET took place at a time when the pendulum was toward the economic end of the cycle, a time still with us when vocational education is understood by many in terms of its economic rather than human significance. But my own research, inspired by the humanistic theory of transformative learning, focused on the way individuals make meaning of their experiences within VET programs. In particular, my research was concerned with the deeper changes in learners as the nature of their new occupations dawned upon them. Yet when I first started talking about this work to VET researchers (such as at the annual AVETRA conference) there were always people who were interested and who offered suggestions for improving and extending the work.

At these same events I met people pursuing VET research from philosophical, psychological, sociological, economic and many other theoretical perspectives, who were focusing on national and international systems, the experiences of individuals and groups, the work of institutions and organisations, and using qualitative or quantitative (or both) modes of research. So not only is VET research important for human and economic reasons and a field of research which needs diverse perspectives, the community of VET researchers is truly a 'broad church' which has demonstrated to me that it welcomes diverse perspectives.