

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES A RESEARCH CENTRE MAKE?

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Introduction

The 1992 Strategic Review of Research in Education argued that educational research in Australia needed to be reoriented towards more team-based work focused on national priority areas. As one part of that reorientation it advocated the establishment of key research centres.

Key research centres create an environment in which challenging, complex and sustained research can be conducted. Provided that the centres are adequately funded, experienced researchers can be freed to concentrate their energies on major problems. Less experienced researchers can be provided with the opportunity to work on a variety of research tasks in a team atmosphere. Key centres also have the potential to benefit from scale economies in research infrastructure such as library materials, computing, research assistance and administrative support. (McGaw et al, 1992, p. 85)

If anything, VET research was even more fragmented and short-term than research on other areas of education in the early 1990s. It was not surprising therefore, that the 1993 review of VET research also argued for the allocation of resources to achieve a "critical mass" of researchers and research projects in areas of high priority (McDonald et al, 1993, p. 15).

Neither review advocated that all the research in priority areas should be concentrated in key research centres. Indeed, both argued for the benefits of diversity in approach and decentralisation of research effort. Nevertheless, both reviews felt that in a climate where the overall level of resources for educational research needed to rise, at least some part of the additional funding should be allocated to key research centres.

The critical difference between those two reports was not in their analysis or in their recommendations, but in their reception: many of the VET research proposals were actually taken up and implemented. Through the efforts initially of the ANTA Research Advisory Committee, and later directly through ANTA itself, overall funding for VET research has risen and several key research centres have been established.

We are now able to apply an empirical test to the concept of key research centres: have they brought about a significant change in the quality, quantity and impact of VET research in their particular fields? I offer a personal response to this question through my experience with the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET). I reflect on the ways in which CEET's structure as a research centre enables a different way of doing VET research than if we were individual researchers loosely linked together. In my view the processes of concentration and focus lead to research of higher quality and greater impact. However, I leave others to judge whether that has actually eventuated.

A Centre generates more resources for VET research

CEET has four Directors and six Research Fellows on staff, and in all involves about six FTE people directly in its research program. All of these people are highly experienced researchers and policy analysts in education and training. Almost of these personnel resources are now directed to VET research, yet before CEET was established only about one-third of these people were working directly on VET research, and then only on a part-time basis. The Centre structure and funding has enabled skilled personnel resources to be diverted from other areas and focused on VET research.

One of the key ways in which this has happened is through the Centre's capacity to offer people longer-term employment contracts than if we were solely reliant on commissioned research contracts. Researchers with highly marketable skills are not going to be attracted to positions offering only six or twelve months tenure, as would otherwise be the case under current university employment conditions.

Having a core of staff supported through the Centre grant provides the capacity to respond quickly to requests for commissioned research and the provision of advice to VET authorities. CEET attracts as much funding for commissioned research as it receives through the Centre grant, and is involved in as much research again on a collaborative basis with other groups that are the direct recipient of commissioned research funding. The Centre grant has a substantial multiplier effect that lifts the overall quantity of resources devoted to research on the economics of VET.

The international networks that CEET has developed mean that it is not just Australian resources that get focused on VET research. The expertise of visiting researchers and international research centres also adds to the pool of findings and perspectives from which Australia can draw. It is doubtful that individual researchers, no matter how well connected, could match the visibility and networking capacity of a key research Centre.

A Centre has extensive interaction with the VET field

ANTA specifies that 25 per cent of the Centre grant is devoted to dissemination and interaction activities with VET policy makers and practitioners. CEET operates an extensive program of seminars, conferences and publications through which research findings are presented and emerging ideas are tested in the field. The CEET mailing list comprises around 700 individuals and organisations, and most of the CEET publications are provided at little or no cost. Some 5000 copies of The CEET Sheet, a two-page discussion of recent and forthcoming research, is sent three times a year to every TAFE institution and VET authority in Australia. Regular columns on CEET activities are maintained in Australian Training and the ACER Newsletter, and special contributions are prepared for other periodicals.

Equally important is the fact that CEET interacts extensively with the VET field in identifying research priorities and conducting research projects. CEET's VET Advisory Committee, which comprises representatives from ANTA, state training authorities, TAFE institutes, private providers, employers, and other VET researchers, plays a major role in shaping the CEET research program. The need for close interaction with the VET sector has also encouraged CEET to engage in collaborative research projects with VET providers and policy groups, and to recruit staff with extensive VET experience.

If CEET was solely dependent on commissioned research projects it is highly unlikely that this range of interaction and dissemination activities could be maintained.

A Centre engages in a different type of research

Centres generate not only a greater number of personnel resources and collaborative links for VET research, but also a greater mix of research expertise and backgrounds. The CEET staff comprises people experienced in different research paradigms and methodologies, and from different discipline and sectoral backgrounds. The diversity of staffing enables the building of research teams with complementary expertise.

Although CEET's focus is on the economics of education and training, the work benefits from involving people from discipline backgrounds other than economics. CEET's 1994 review of the field argued that it is simply not possible to consider questions of the level and distribution of costs and benefits through VET without detailed knowledge of the sector itself (Burke et al, 1994). This orientation required us to recruit staff with a wider range of discipline backgrounds and direct experience of the VET sector than would be typically available to, say, a university economics department.

The number and mix of staff that a Centre is able to recruit and train, and its extensive relationships with the VET sector, means that research ideas are constantly being challenged and debated for their rigour and their relevance. By contrast, individual researchers are likely to find it much more difficult to engage in such an interactive environment.

Having a core of researchers enables CEET to conduct longer-term, more complex projects than agencies are normally prepared to fund. The Centre structure also enables us to integrate findings from a wide range of sources in a way that is hopefully useful to those wanting access to state-of-the-art reviews.

Conclusion

Key research centres in priority areas are a recent development in the VET field, having started through AN TARAC in 1994. In CEET's case, support as a Key Centre has greatly accelerated development of a research field, the economics of VET, that had received little systematic attention in Australia before the early 1990s.

Some indication of the impact of research centres can be gained from the experiences of Australia's longest-established educational research centre, ACER. In 1996-97 ACER involved about 2 per cent of the person-years, and 4 per cent of the expenditure, allocated to education and training R&D in Australia (ABS, 1998). Most people would probably agree that ACER's work has a greater impact on educational policy and practice than this modest level of resources would imply.

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