

Community capacity building in regional VET: the place for small business in developing a lifelong learning community. Disparate workplace learning cultures or similar challenges for VET?

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Lifelong learning and developing learning communities is a topic of debate globally, (OECD 1996, DFEE 1998, UNEVOC 1998, 1999) but despite much heady optimism, some critics are concerned about the difference between the rhetoric and the reality and claims of a 'catch all policy', being marketed as the panacea for the learning needs of all communities (Oliver 1999, Edwards 1999, Martin 1999). In Australia, Kearns *et al* (1999) have found the need to document the challenges and barriers to lifelong learning between the many stakeholders in Vocational Education and Training (VET), and others for a redefinition of the learning and value of the 'practical wisdom' gained in the workplace, community and non formal VET sector (Boud, 1998, Beckett and Hagar 1997, Moreland 1999). Small and micro business provide much employment and self employment in regional Australia (Kilpatrick and Bell, 1999), however small business is isolated from formal VET by its workplace culture, heterogeneity and diversity of learning needs. In the light of this, there is often the assumption that little valuable learning is taking place in the small firm and its role is minimal in community capacity building and promulgating lifelong learning. Longworth (1996, 1998), Unevoc (1999) and the OECD (1996) have stressed the importance of building successful learning partnerships between VET, business and the community for a lifelong learning policy to be effectively resourced and strategic, as opposed to 'ad hoc' policy. There are questions about the role for small business in lifelong learning in a lean, contestable market driven era of VET and if not more competitive, volatile small business sector – where there is evidence the smaller the firm, the less likely it will have any interest in formal education and training. How amenable are employers to developing learning partnerships with local VET and information service providers and what types of successful learning partnerships with VET exist in the community already? What is the nature of lifelong learning taking place in the small firm and to what extent does that learning diffuse into the wider community? (CRLRA 2000; Kilpatrick and Bell 1999). What other types of successful learning partnerships with small business exist in other regions which might work here? What does this mean for a more integrated role for VET and small business in this particular region and building the intellectual, human and social capital in the often transient, casualised small business workforce? How might this in turn impact on developing an equitable lifelong learning community in the Adelaide Hills, South Australia? This working paper will discuss the researcher's progress towards exploring some of these issues.