

**The history and achievements of the
Australian Vocational Education and
Training Research Association
(AVETRA)**

1997-2007



Cydde Miller

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1. Foreword and acknowledgements

Firstly I would like to recognise the great contribution of Dr Ray Barker to VET research, and the capacity, through his generous donation, that he has given to AVETRA to explore its own history and its future.

I would particularly like to thank Peter Kell, outgoing President of AVETRA, for his guidance and openness throughout this project. Sarah Sutcliffe at the Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education (at the Canberra Institute of Technology) also helped greatly with providing direction for this project as part of the Reference Group.

My thanks are also due to Kaye Bowman who has been a great mentor for me as a younger VET researcher. I continue to benefit from Kaye's insight and support, and appreciate it immensely.

There is a core group of people who sit within and around the edges of AVETRA who have been undertaking this work for a long time, and will continue to do so – I think in some ways it is a life-force for them. These people obviously hold so much of the history in their heads, more than I can convey through this work. I thank those with whom I was able to talk during the course of this project.

So I hope this serves not only as a snapshot of the development and achievements of AVETRA, but also a testament to the remarkable people who continue to be a major part of the Association and the goals for which has striven over ten years.

The data sources for this report are described in Appendix A..The views expressed in the report are my own and not necessarily those of the Association.

Cydde Miller

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2. Executive Summary

2.1 Introduction

The Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) is at a watershed in its history. Formed in 1997, it has been an active 'meeting point' for vocational education and training (VET) researchers for ten years and has been instrumental in raising the profile and quality of VET research in Australia and internationally.

During the first half of the 1990s VET research in Australia was primarily seen as part of the remit of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), and while there were a number of individual VET researchers and small groups based in TAFE Institutes, state government departments and universities, there was no formal network in place. The TAFE practitioners were responsible for a small amount of specific research activity, particularly around curriculum development and models of teaching and learning, but VET research was generally not considered a major field of endeavour attracting funds within universities (for example, through the Australian Research Council). However there was nevertheless a committed core of researchers, particularly those in universities that were involved in VET teacher training, who saw the value in building a skilled research workforce and a cumulative evidence base for decisions made in the changing VET environment.

Dedicated national funding for VET-focussed research came with the creation of the Australian National Training Authority in 1993 and a committed Research Advisory Committee, partly in response to a report led by Rod McDonald called *No small change: Proposals for a research and development strategy for VET in Australia* (McDonald *et al* 1993). This report suggested there was a significant gap in the knowledge and skills applied to research in VET and therefore to the practices and policies of the sector itself. It emphasised that a significant financial investment was required to strengthen the evidence base for Australian VET and ensure a coordinated critical mass of researchers.

AVETRA was created at the time of the cessation of the Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Committee (ANTARAC) which had been the first group responsible for setting research priorities and distributing competitive funding (operating from 1994 to 1997). These responsibilities moved to NCVER in the form of the National Research and Evaluation Committee (NREC) and the first national VET research strategy was put forward for 1997-2000 (NCVER 1997). Some of the early impact of AVETRA was to fight for recognition of both university and TAFE-based research which, to that point, had no national organisation, advocacy or significant status. Perhaps its clearest achievement was the establishment of an independent and apolitical voice in VET research.

Critically, the Association came into being during a period of significant change in the Australian vocational education and training (VET) environment. In 1997 the system made a concerted effort to shift towards national consistency and increased responsiveness to the needs of

industry and employers. This followed a period in which national data collections were improving rapidly through the work of NCVER.

In this context, AVETRA's original aims were to:

- Promote quality VET research
- Lobby for VET research
- Review VET research priorities
- Promote interaction, networking the exchange of ideas amongst VET researchers
- Promote VET research training, and
- Provide platforms for the promotion and dissemination of VET research and research information such as conferences, newsletters and a journal.

[letter to Foundation AVETRA Group, 7 April 1997]

AVETRA spent the next ten years building and refining its identity and marking out a respected and high-quality space for researchers of vocational education and training. This was reflected in the immediate success of its national conferences and in the large volume of research work that AVETRA members undertook and released across a range of topic areas. The names on the AVETRA membership list over the years have been some of the most significant contributors to the body of knowledge now readily accessible throughout the world.

AVETRA is now at a point in where it needs to assess its position within the VET landscape and clearly define its roles in this context, building on the aims articulated at its inception and its achievements over the first ten years. AVETRA must now look at ways of re-engaging and also broadening its membership base. There is no question that AVETRA has a critical and continuing role to play in the Australian VET sector. Recent changes in the executive committee have seen the challenges of a loss of 'corporate knowledge' from the leadership of the Association but also the opportunities afforded by the addition of significant new expertise.

3. About AVETRA

AVETRA is a professional association, and the role of an association is to represent and defend the interests of practitioners, to promote the field of practice, establish its identity and set codes of conduct, [and] to support training and professional development...

[1999 Conference Proceedings, p.7]

The formation of AVETRA coincided with significant changes in the VET system as a whole. The need for a national VET research strategy and committed research effort was emphasised in *No small change: Proposals for a research and development strategy for VET in Australia*, which indicated a dearth of evidence around the changes in the VET system such as the new national approach, workplace reforms, employer responsibility and TAFE restructuring:

A stronger research effort will benefit the sector by providing a better information base, critical analysis and accountability, improved cost effectiveness, varied perspectives, a better understanding of education and training processes and a higher profile for VET.

[McDonald et al 1993, p.v]

Throughout four iterations of a national VET research strategy since 1997, the focus of VET research has included building better links between employers and training providers, ensuring all Australians have equitable access to appropriate quality education and training, understanding what skills are required to meet the needs of industry and regions, and articulation between vocational education and higher education. Other areas of inquiry include the use of emerging technologies and flexible learning, adult literacy, youth transitions, apprenticeships and traineeships, quality teaching and learning, recognition of prior learning (RPL), workplace learning and the design and implementation of training packages.

AVETRA members have been and continue to be amongst the leaders in VET research and translation of findings into policy and practice. They are responsible for the accumulation of a critical body of knowledge about VET both in Australia and internationally over a relatively short space of time. It is the work of these researchers, amongst others, that helped practitioners within the VET system to better understand their students, the 'end users' of training such as employers and governments, and the changes occurring in policy that impacted on their practices. Over the years it has been difficult to quantify the exact impact of research in this field, and despite its achievements AVETRA members have often expressed concern about the extent to which key stakeholders are aware of and use the research they are producing.

3.1 Who and what is AVETRA for?

The stated principle behind AVETRA is that:

[it] shall be independent and its functions shall be to facilitate action, consultation and the exchange of information in the field of vocational education and training research.

[AVETRA Constitution]

AVETRA has spent a great deal of time advocating for the status, quality and use of VET research undertaken by its members – indeed, AVETRA was established on the basis of concern over these issues and this was written into its [Constitution](#) from day one. While members focus on their research in key topics, the Association itself maintains ongoing comment about the role of research in decision-making and represents the interests of its researchers.

AVETRA members are individual researchers who work in a range of environments - academics, professionals, practitioners and consultants - and who spend some or all of their time exploring aspects of vocational education and training from a variety of perspectives. Several members of AVETRA are active in researching adult, community and further education in addition to the vocational, though this is not explicitly part of the remit of the Association. AVETRA has also maintained a number of members who are the end users of the research, such as policy-makers and VET administrators.

A key feature of AVETRA is that it relies heavily on the willingness and availability of researchers to voluntarily contribute to its ongoing business and direction through participation on the executive. The nature of a necessarily finite professional association with clear boundaries on its work is that it will never have a high income. To this end, AVETRA has prospered thanks to the commitment of people involved under some quite challenging financial and political circumstances over the past ten years.

When formed, AVETRA brought together a diversity of researchers from universities and TAFE institutes as well as a handful of independent consultants. Academic researchers needed to compete for the limited amount of funds available and face the pressures of having to maintain a certain level of research output to sustain their status as active researchers. For TAFE-based researchers it was critical to evaluate the key tenets of their practice in vocational education and training, and improve it to serve the needs of teachers, students, employers and industry. Therefore, raising the status and funding for VET specific research was imperative across the board.

3.2 The foundations of AVETRA

In the climate of change across the VET sector during the early 1990s, there was a growing but fragmented VET research community. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was established as part of the One Nation Statement released in 1992 by then Prime Minister Paul Keating. The Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Committee (ANTARAC)

was subsequently established in 1994, in part due to recommendations from *No small change* (McDonald et al 1993) which paved the way for supporting key research centres and competitive VET research with dedicated funding.

The ANTARAC was situated as a committee advising the commissioning body ANTA, and was comprised of representatives of state and federal departments, unions and curriculum development bodies. A number of concerns were raised about the proximity of the research priority-setters and decision-makers to the funding body (ANTA).

When ANTARAC was disbanded in 1997, some of its functions were passed to NCVET. These included the management of the competitive research funds and national research priority setting (maintaining the concern about 'distance' between funding body and decision-maker). In this context, there was a clear need for a professional association to support and represent the interests of VET researchers undertaking the work.

AVETRA was a completely new idea for the emerging VET research community, and was not directly linked to any former functions or directives of ANTARAC. It was, however, at the final ANTARAC conference in 1997 that a clear and common desire was expressed to set up a professional association for VET researchers. This was the culmination of a great deal of 'behind the scenes' effort to ensure there was an organisation strategically placed to be an independent voice in VET research.

The outgoing chair of ANTARAC, Gregor Ramsey, agreed with his colleagues and was keen to see an independent association established in an environment that was threatening to leave everything in the hands of politically vested interests. He provided \$10,000 in seed funding to assist an organisation to carry on the VET research conference, and this gave further impetus for AVETRA to come into being. Leo Maglen (University of Melbourne), Chris Robinson (NCVER) and Karen Whittingham (TAFE NSW) formed the interim executive committee until formal elections could be held at the first AVETRA conference in early 1998. The other 'Foundation Group Members' of AVETRA were:

Mary Barrett; Stephen Billett; Berwyn Clayton; Margaret Crowley; Lenore Dembski; Ian Falk; Roger Harris; Megan Lilley; Rod McDonald; John McIntyre; Maryanne Peterson; Terri Seddon; Robyn Sefton; Jozefa Sobski; Patricia Stewart; Lucy Stockdale; and Graham Weaver

For the first half of AVETRA's existence, three key organisations were responsible for subsidising the Association's activities by providing secretariat support and conference venues:

- Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT);
- Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT); and
- TAFE NSW.

In its early days, AVETRA succeeded in creating more collaborative and harmonious relationships between researchers in universities and TAFEs – though this was a challenge in

an environment where research tensions were clear (see *Challenges in VET Research* below). It was suggested that AVETRA offered a way for TAFE and university based researchers to ensure direct links were maintained between practice and theory in the work they were doing. The Association also provided a focal point for the enthusiasm of the emerging VET research community, particularly through its conferences which provided great opportunities to get together and socialise as well as understand the new areas of research being undertaken. These functions remain salient for AVETRA today.

3.3 Sector contributions

While AVETRA is primarily occupied with promoting VET research and a supporting and flourishing environment for VET researchers, as an Association it has also contributed to broader VET agendas.

In its earlier days, AVETRA members contributed key advice to the development of national VET research priorities, particularly through Reviews of Research published by NCVET that indicated what work had been done in particular topic areas and what more needed doing. These were core to the development of the first national VET research strategy for 1997-2000 (NCVER 1997).

AVETRA has also been active in other ways such as contributing submissions to government inquiries and reviews (eg. the review of NCVET in 2005), and providing a variety of forums in which researchers and end-users could engage in dialogue. AVETRA continues to have a key voice in the setting of national VET research priorities, though the role of the Association in this process has always been much less than the voices of other bodies (eg. the Council of Australian Governments and the Ministerial Council on Vocational and Technical Education).

AVETRA also undertook a major project in 2007 to rank national and international journals in vocational and further education and training. The project was conceived as a response to the now-defunct Research Quality Framework proposed by the then federal government, but will continue to be useful to academic VET researchers into the future.

3.4 AVETRA Executive

The AVETRA executive includes the following positions: President, Vice President, Treasurer and Secretary. There is capacity for up to 12 executive members, including the four designated positions, four additional elected and four co-opted members to assist with key tasks such as financial management, publications and event organisation.

Following the establishment of the Foundation Group, elections were first held in 1998 to put the constitution into effect. Leo Maglen from the University of Melbourne was elected to President having been the interim chair of AVETRA since the last ANARAC Conference in 1997. Karen Whittingham also carried on in the capacity of Secretary and Treasurer while Berwyn Clayton was elected as Vice President. Mid-way through 1999 Leo Maglen resigned as President. Berwyn Clayton assumed the office of the Presidency and Peter Kell moved into the

position of Vice President. Elections were held later in 1999 to appoint the second term of AVETRA executives. Peter Kell became President in 2004.

Table 1: Executive office bearers, 1997 to 2008

Position	Person^(a)	Term
President	Professor Leo Maglen (University of Melbourne)	1997 – 1999
	Ms Berwyn Clayton (Canberra Institute of Technology)	1999 – 2004
	Associate Professor Peter Kell (University of Wollongong)	2004 – 2008
Vice President	Ms Berwyn Clayton	1998 – 1999
	Associate Professor Peter Kell	1999 – 2002
	Associate Professor Roger Harris (University of SA)	2002 – 2004
	Ms Karen Whittingham (TAFE NSW)	2004 – 2006
	Ms Fran Ferrier (Monash University)	2006 – 2008
Treasurer	Ms Karen Whittingham	1997 – 2004
	Mr Paul Williams (TAFE NSW)	2004 – 2006
	Mr Ray Tolhurst (TAFE NSW)	2006 – 2008
Secretary	Ms Karen Whittingham	1997 – 2002
	Ms Fran Ferrier	2002 – 2004
	Ms Leesa Wheelahan (Griffith University)	2004 – 2006
	Professor Erica Smith (Charles Sturt University)	2006 – 2008

Note: (a) Institutions/organisations listed are those that individuals were based at during their tenure

Originally, the AVETRA constitution stipulated that office bearers could only hold their position for a single term of two years. This was amended in a lively Special General Meeting in 2002 to enable two consecutive terms of two years each so that executive members could settle and achieve something without compromising the need for rotation of office bearers. In part this was to alleviate the burden on incumbents to achieve much in a short space of time, and also to allow Berwyn Clayton to continue her successful reign as President. In this context, many members of the executive have held various elected and co-opted positions throughout the ten years. The only foundation member remaining on the 2008-10 executive is immediate Past President Peter Kell.

Quite informally, there has been a rotating arrangement of having a VET provider-based researcher and university researcher as President and Vice President respectively. For the first time AVETRA will now have a President who is based in a dual-sector institution, theoretically serving both VET and university imperatives (Erica Smith, University of Ballarat, elected for 2008-2010).

All current and past executive members interviewed for this project agreed on the exceptional work and amount of effort put in by AVETRA's three Presidents to date – Leo Maglen for being a key driving force to establish the Association; Berwyn Clayton for her absolute commitment and enthusiasm towards building the profile of VET research; and Peter Kell for his sheer effort and diplomacy in an increasingly challenging environment.

There is also no doubt about the level of tribute to Karen Whittingham in particular, whose commitment to making AVETRA work effectively was relentless.

Table 2: All executive members, 1997 to 2008

University-based	VET sector-based^(a)	Others^(b)
Llandis Barratt-Pugh (2006-)	John Blakeley (2000-2006)	Kaye Bowman (2006-)
Stephen Billett (1998-2000)	Berwyn Clayton (1997-2006)	Jane Figgis (2000-2002)
Mike Brown (2004-2006)	Lindsay Cotton (1998-2000)	Hugh Guthrie (1998-2006)
Cathy Down (2002-2006)	Kevin Heys (2003-)	Jennifer Newcombe (2000)
Fran Ferrier (2000-)	Jennifer Nevard (1999-2000)	
Barry Golding (2000-2006)	Jozefa Sobski (1997-1999)	
Roger Harris (1998-2006)	Sarah Sutcliffe (2007-)	
Angela Hill (2006-)	Judith Uren (2004-2006)	
Peter Kell (1998-)	Graham Weaver (1997-2000)	
John McIntyre (1997; 2000-2004)	Karen Whittingham (1997-2006)	
Leo Maglen (1997-1999)	Paul Williams (2004-2006)	
Michele Simons (2006-)		
Erica Smith (2002-)		
Ray Tolhurst (2006-)		
Ruth Wallace (2006-)		
Leesa Wheelahan (2004-2006)		

Notes: (a) VET sector-based members include TAFE/departmental representatives and private VET providers

(b) Other members include NCVET representatives, consultants and non-government organisations

3.5 Membership

AVETRA is the sum of its members, all of whom are individuals rather than 'representatives' of the organisations they work for. At least this is the intention of AVETRA membership, and a key defining part of its establishment was to ensure an independent association. Therefore, the Constitution made clear that there would be no organisational membership of AVETRA, a point which was debated in its foundation days. The clarity of maintaining individual-only subscription has ensured that AVETRA has never been 'overtaken' by any organisational or political interests.

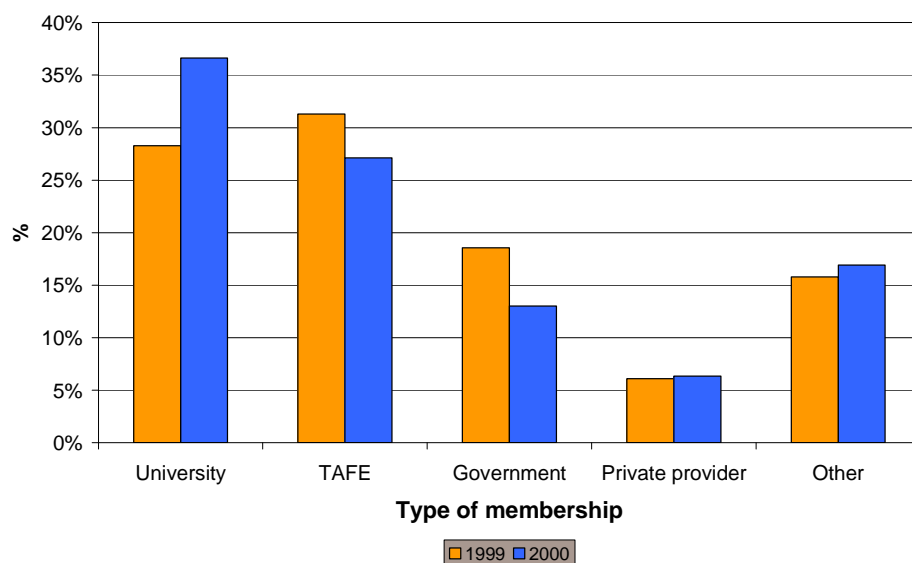
By March 1998, AVETRA had 237 members. This partly reflected the people who had been present at the last ANTARAC conference and promoted it throughout their networks. A deliberate and strategic marketing approach was also agreed and pursued by key members of the interim executive, based on promotion at other conferences and to other similar organisations, as well as 'membership drives' offering discounts. Any chance they got to talk about it, they did.

From year to year the membership list has fluctuated based on the location and program content of the conference – until 2004, registration included complimentary membership for one year. This has since changed to ensure that membership and conference accounts are kept separate, and instead the conference now has a member and non-member rate for registration.

Though AVETRA maintains a core group of members, significant numbers do not renew in the following year as they do not attend the conference again. In spite of this, AVETRA has maintained fairly consistent member numbers between 280 and 330 based on its core group and good attendance at conferences each year.

The main area of membership fluctuation is based on the professional associations of delegates to conferences (ie. what type of organisation they belong to). Figure 1 shows the different pattern of membership between 1999 and 2000 – the 1999 conference was held in Canberra and hosted by CIT with substantial attendance by government employees, while the 2000 conference was held in Melbourne at RMIT with a large local university contingent.

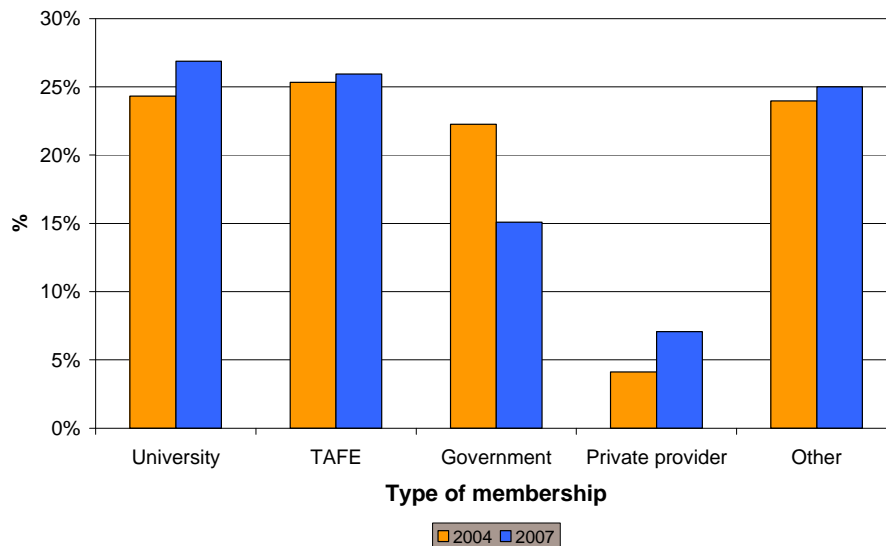
Figure 1: Comparison of membership by type, 1999 and 2000



- Notes:
- (a) 'University' includes a significant number of members from dual sector institutions, particularly RMIT, Swinburne University and Victoria University
 - (b) 'TAFE' includes only Institute-based members
 - (c) 'Government' includes State Training Authorities, and other State and Commonwealth departments
 - (d) 'Private provider' includes non-government and enterprise providers of training
 - (e) 'Other' includes NCVET, ITABs, non-profit organisations, consultants and overseas members

Over recent years there has been more of a membership shift towards end-users of the research and those researchers who are not affiliated with either universities or TAFEs. Figure 2 shows a comparison between the 2004 and 2007 membership, with the conferences held in Canberra and Melbourne again. It shows that a far greater proportion of AVETRA members are now drawn from outside the traditional research settings of the universities and TAFE institutes.

Figure 2: Comparison of membership by type, 2004 and 2007



Notes: See Figure 1 above

In a jurisdictional analysis, there is an existing and vibrant VET research network within Victoria, many of whom are members of AVETRA (particularly those based in TAFE institutes, RMIT, Swinburne University and Victoria University). NCVET has always joined-up several of its researchers with a number of other key members based in South Australia, while the ACT has also maintained a large membership contingent particularly through CIT. TAFE NSW and its institutes are also well-represented amongst the AVETRA membership from year to year, as are several NSW Universities.

AVETRA has rarely had a significant Queensland or Western Australian membership, and with small populations in Tasmania and the Northern Territory there will never be a large number of members there. On some occasions this has been the impetus for co-opting particular members to executive to build membership in these areas. The key issue is with Queensland – many key VET researchers are based in the Sunshine state but have infrequently taken on AVETRA membership.

In part, especially in the early days of the Association, lower numbers of Queensland members was perhaps due to the strength of effort coming out of Griffith University whose VET academics hosted an annual conference, the International Conference on Post-Compulsory Education and Training. This conference is no longer held. However Queenslanders have occupied prominent positions in AVETRA, with Stephen Billett who was a member of the first AVETRA executive, John Stevenson as editor of the journal when it was transferred to AVETRA, and John Blakeley who was a long term member of the AVETRA executive and co-ordinated the 2006 conference.

3.6 Committees and tasks

After its first few years AVETRA created small sub-committees of the executive to take on roles and tasks of the Association. In recent times this has reverted to 'job assignment' in which individual members of the executive are responsible for specific tasks and can co-opt others to assist if required. The main tasks are:

- Membership;
- Professional development;
- Annual conference;
- OctoberVET and other events;
- The journal; and
- The newsletter.

3.7 Secretariat

The AVETRA Secretariat has primarily been led by the elected Secretary with support from their organisation and more recent outsourcing of conference administration. For much of AVETRA's history, Karen Whittingham filled this role. A lot of hard work and in-kind effort has been contributed to the administration of AVETRA throughout its existence.

Since 2001 AVETRA has externally contracted many of the administrative functions of the Association, particularly to assist with organisation of the annual conference and maintenance of the website. From 2001 to 2005 the Nowra-based company *Well Done Events* successfully undertook the Secretariat functions and arguably oversaw the strongest growth period in the Association's history. From 2005 this role has been fulfilled by *Conference Action* in Sydney.

3.8 A Constitution and Code of Practice

The AVETRA [Constitution](#) was developed by John McIntyre with assistance from Karen Whittingham and clearly set out the objectives of the Association (which are numerous and available by clicking the link above). AVETRA's objectives have never been altered and the ten-year mark may be a good point at which to reaffirm the goals. The only change to the constitution has been the amendment of executive office-bearing terms from two years to four if they choose to nominate after their first term – though re-election is possible to other positions on the executive.

The AVETRA [Code of Practice](#) was developed by Stephen Billett during his term on the first executive and has also remains unchanged. Though voluntary, the Code of Practice is generally adhered to by all VET researchers, not just members of AVETRA. Its significance is that it makes consistent the research expectations and practices of professionals across all settings. It was based on the ethics developed by the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE), but provided a specific set of principles for VET-focussed researchers.

4. Challenges in VET Research

AVETRA has existed during a period of intense change and challenges in education and training. That it has survived a period of policy development characterised by overt political influence at all levels is a testament to its importance and staying power. There are a lot of contextual factors outside the VET research sector that impact on the work of the Association and its capacity to meet its goals, including the resource limitations across the VET sector itself. TAFE institutes and universities have consistently struggled with funding rationalisation which has eroded the capacity of VET research in these key settings. University-based researchers are also often limited by the small size or absence of VET-specific teaching or research units.

4.1 Not only Australian

While there has been a substantial New Zealand membership of the Association since its earliest days, the limited funds available to AVETRA has restricted the extent to which it can actively engage with their VET research community. At various points consideration has been given to changing the name of the Association to account for the fact it is a trans-Tasman organisation, but until such time as a more active engagement can occur this has been put on hold.

4.2 Research tensions

One of the key issues raised by all executives has been the tension between university and VET provider-based research output which has been a central concern of AVETRA since day one. It is clearly one of the defining factors in the identity of the Association. The situation is made more complex with the diverse nature of the AVETRA membership which includes various end-users of the research as well as independent consultants.

These tensions manifest themselves as a dialogue about the relative quality of research undertaken in different settings – and AVETRA's response has appropriately been tailored around professional development and discernment of purposes for different types of research. The anxiety for the Association arises from the different demands and expectations placed on researchers in various contexts. For example, university-based researchers are concerned with maintaining high-quality and prolific output through conference papers and journal articles – and sometimes question the extent to which the AVETRA conference and journal achieve such goals for them. Meanwhile, the pressures on TAFE-based researchers are to show a return to their organisation from the investment in research and the direct impacts the findings will have in practice. Different again are the interests of independent consultants for whom the Association is critical in an environment where they would have no other professional support short of independently maintained networks. Part of the challenge for AVETRA has been to manage the diverse and often contradictory expectations and priorities associated with its membership and external agencies.

There has also been a perceived stigma around VET research generally, despite the critical and significant achievements of AVETRA and other researchers over the last ten years. In spite of several studies to explore research impact within the sector, the VET research community is sometimes questioned about the extent to which its research can be translated into practice. In addition, VET research is sometimes undervalued by the wider academic community in the Education discipline. The impact studies that have been commissioned show that while it is challenging to show influence on policy and practice, the research appears to have played a key role in developing the VET system we have in Australia today. Before the advent of the Research Quality Framework exercise, no agreed measures of quality have been available to be applied to the body of research and this suggests that any criticism of quality or impact is not informed by empirical evidence.

VET-specific research funds, mainly provided through the NCVET, have always been finite. In some cases, VET-specific research has been subsumed within centres that address more broadly educational or economic research. In this context, researchers and institutions are not fully able to engender and promote a culture of innovation and succession planning unless their own institutes and organisations commit funds to ongoing VET-focused inquiry.

4.3 Researching in a political environment

Interestingly, AVETRA has existed in the context of a conservative federal Australian government. Elected in 1996 prior to AVETRA's inauguration, the Coalition government led by John Howard had an unquestionable impact on the level of influence the Association could have, the priorities for research and the reception and use of research. This has always manifested itself in limited resources but NCVET competitive grants have provided a dedicated source for VET research, not common in other discipline areas. The Association is keenly following the progress of the new Labor government elected in November 2007 which made a commitment to an 'education revolution' and is interested in seeing improved support for the resourcing of VET research. However State and Territory governments as well as the federal government have consistently funded major VET research consultancies over the years.

Some executive members interviewed for this project suggested that AVETRA members have been somewhat limited in the topics and types of research they can undertake as part of a national research strategy. The NCVET priorities are mandated by the Council of Australian Governments, the Ministerial Council on VET and various other interest groups. While not necessarily negative, this does limit the areas of inquiry, and with the diversity of the AVETRA membership as it is, does not always offer topics to attract a strong research community of various interests and specialities. For example, there has always been some financial capacity and a great deal of strength in research focussed on VET practice, but most recently this has shifted to focus predominantly on policy, according to some interviewees. The need for a more open and diverse approach to research topics and methodologies was a recommendation of the independent review of NCVET contracts in 2005 to which AVETRA contributed. It must be acknowledged, however, that the NCVET distribution of National VET Research and Evaluation

(NVETRE) funds allows for an open category each year. Researchers can seek funding from various other sources such as the Australian Research Council (ARC) which are not limited in their scope. The potential issue with the latter is that the work is undertaken outside the scope of a broader national strategy, and therefore the users of research may not be aware of its existence.

AVETRA has always attempted to maintain its independence from the politics of VET, though this is difficult to achieve when the core of the research community is so closely connected and a fair proportion of its members are based in VET organisations and government departments. There has been ongoing tension between the Association's own goals and the extent to which it should respond to government policies and state and federal governments directly. This is reflected in some past tensions experienced with the Australian National Training Authority as the main source of funds from 1997 to 2005, and more recently the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST, until 2007). While adopting an independent stance, AVETRA has always been cognisant of balancing the primary interests of members with those of government and the needs of the sector. This has never been an easy balance to strike.

4.4 NCVET relationship

There has always been a close relationship between AVETRA and NCVET, particularly as NCVET has in-house researchers who are also members of AVETRA and input significant amounts of effort to its activities – including the contributions of Hugh Guthrie and other senior researchers from its foundation days. However, AVETRA has not allowed representatives of NCVET, or other organisations, on its executive committee given the primary imperative to ensure the Association remained completely independent of any organisational influence. Members of the committee are required to participate as individuals not representatives.

Some tensions continue with the close relationship NCVET is required to maintain with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (formerly DEST) as the primary dedicated fund source for VET research. The driving forces for VET research mentioned above mean that some people perceive that it is difficult to maintain an arm's length between the single level of government and the researchers' activities funded through this source.

The challenge for AVETRA members is the extent to which the Association maintain its autonomy in such an environment and still lobby for committed government funds to sustain the research activity. Ultimately, researchers have either chosen to apply for these funds or sought funds from other sources (or both).

4.5 Where are the research dollars?

With the creation of targeted VET research funding, now managed by NCVET and previously by ANTARAC, AVETRA members have essentially competed for a small amount of dedicated research capital. One respondent suggested that the funds specifically available for VET research are well above those available in other disciplines of research. Indeed the VET sector

is unique in the sense that it has a clearly articulated research strategy and funds to back that up. Several AVETRA members have also been in receipt of ARC funds at various times. The more recent approach to funding research consortia through the NVETRE program has its benefits, but it has also limited the extent to which independent researchers have funds available to complement the major research programs. While NCVET continues to offer open funding each year, some argue that the amounts remain too small to sustain a significant VET research community on its own beyond the consortia. This observation was articulated in the AVETRA submission to the Review of the NCVET research contracts in 2005.

AVETRA researchers also rely heavily on consultancies available through various levels of government (local, state/territory and federal), and through tenders let by larger organisations that are willing to invest in labour-market related research. A select few universities and VET providers also fund research within their institutions, though as noted above this has come under pressure from system-wide resource limitations.

Generally, there has been an underinvestment in research infrastructure and 'building spaces' for VET researchers in universities and TAFE institutes. Some AVETRA members see this as reflected in lost and low productivity. While there has been a huge increase in the emphasis on evidence-based policy and practice across a range of areas, this has not been reflected in investment across the spectrum of research inquiry and human and material resources.

The strength of the VET research community in 2007 has relied on the commitment of certain institutions to build and maintain their research infrastructure and staff over the last ten years and longer. Most of the key university-based VET research centres have been established around institutions that delivered VET teacher training, such as Charles Sturt University, University of South Australia, and RMIT. Some universities have experienced diminishing numbers of VET teacher-training students, and this has impacted on the extent to which some VET research centres can thrive. However, some institutions are recognising the ongoing need for good VET research, and are beginning to commit greater resources. Victoria University and Charles Darwin University are examples.

In the TAFE system there is more pressure on the research capacity, with established centres such as CURVE at the Canberra Institute of Technology at times struggling to maintain their independence and committed funding. It was suggested that TAFE Institutes may have returned to focussing their 'research' efforts on marketing and the minimal evaluation of teaching and learning. Beyond such limited preoccupations it is difficult for VET practitioners to put aside the time and find the funding to support broader ranging research inquiry.

4.6 Going grey quietly?

The VET research community is undoubtedly ageing – though one hopes not irreversibly! Those who have moved on from AVETRA express concern about the state of the VET research community. Succession planning is imperative, and the co-option of members to executive has always been one way of addressing this. One of the biggest challenges AVETRA has identified

for itself is the need to provide opportunities for emerging researchers. In an environment where established researchers and centres have sometimes been struggling to meet their own needs, it has sometimes been difficult to put in place clear career pathways for upcoming VET researchers (eg. through Masters, PhD, and post-doctoral opportunities) and for the 'bedrock' members to provide the support needed for their development.

There are also difficulties in identifying exactly where VET research is actually occurring outside the main centres and funding sources, including in other universities besides those with VET research centres and groups, other faculties of universities apart from Education faculties, as well as within VET providers. AVETRA has thus not always been able to effectively tap into the full extent of VET research activity where and when it is happening, and has struggled with this through its whole ten years. To be effective in fulfilling its Constitutional imperatives for providing support and services to VET researchers, AVETRA has often grappled with the need to understand the capacity of the existing VET research workforce and identify where the potential lies in a new generation. To this end, AVETRA commissioned an environmental scan in 2004 to establish a baseline of understanding of the research community at the time. This scan has not been repeated.

5. The Annual Conference

AVETRA was established after the final AN TARAC conference in 1997. AVETRA took up where AN TARAC left off – the \$10000 contributed by Gregor Ramsey was for an organisation to hold a VET research conference in 1998. AVETRA successfully filled that role.

Various organisations have supported the AVETRA conference, mainly through sponsorship and assistance with venues and administration. AVETRA relied heavily on the local TAFEs and universities to assist, though the financial burden of the conference remained high. In all years however, with sponsorship and registrations, AVETRA has made a small profit.

Until 2004, registration for the conference included membership. As such, a key influence on the constitution of the membership for most of AVETRA's existence was the conference. The make-up of the membership was strongly affected by the location in which the conference was held, and whether it was university-based or TAFE-based. The strongest influence on non-core membership is arguably the program developed by the Executive Conference Committee each year, regardless of the removal of membership as part of registration. This has been balanced by the introduction of differential member and non-member rates.

Most conferences have had a specific schedule of professional development workshops attached to the main program offering practical advice on research methods, data analysis, report writing and implementation of research findings. Most often these workshops were held the day before the main conference. This was sometimes criticised as the up-coming researchers and VET practitioners most in need of the professional development opportunities were the least likely to attend due to cost and time limitations.

It is clear from the summary of the conferences presented below that AVETRA has consistently fulfilled its role in providing both a means of dissemination for researchers' findings and a context in which dialogue about AVETRA and research itself could thrive.

Some past executives commented that AVETRA is an association built around a conference. Certainly the conference is a key feature of AVETRA, though the comment highlighted the perception that the year between conferences has historically meant a drop-off in activity. In this context it was suggested that AVETRA provides limited opportunities for the membership to engage with the Association and with each other. In part this criticism has been alleviated by the introduction of multiple OctoberVET events (see *Other events and awards* below).

The conference has consistently attracted between 150 and 250 attendees. AVETRA provides the option for both refereed and non-refereed papers in an effort to balance the expectations of university and VET-based researchers. Overviews, abstracts and papers are available from the AVETRA website: <http://www.aveutra.org.au/publications/archives.shtml>.

All papers presented at AVETRA since 1998 have also been indexed on VOCED, the NCVET/UNESCO database on technical and vocational education and training: <http://www.voced.edu.au/>.

1998: VET Research – Influencing Policy and Practice

University of Technology Sydney, 16-17 February

Organised by Rod McDonald, John McIntyre, Andrew Gonczi and Paul Hager

By all accounts the first AVETRA conference was a great success. Though it had been preceded by ANTARAC conferences, this was the first foray for the new Association into interacting with its membership and establishing its own identity. The papers from this conference focussed on some of the key issues being explored by VET researchers:

- Equity in participation
- Partnerships and stakeholders
- Practice and practitioners
- Research and policy relationships
- Learning, work and organisations, and
- Markets and the economy.

1999: Quality and Diversity in VET Research

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, 11-12 February

Convened by Peter Kell

The second conference clearly shifted focus from the content of VET research to the processes and products of that research. The conference sought to map and describe research conducted by universities, TAFE Institutes, other VET providers, Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs), private consultants, unions and teachers, trainers and students to examine the implications of such diversity on:

- Research training
- Research funding policy
- Research quality and quality of outcomes, and
- Research as a means of informing policy and practice.

2000: Future Research, Research Futures

Rydges Canberra, 23-24 March

Convened by Berwyn Clayton

In a sense to carry on from the 1999 conference, the event held in Canberra had the following themes looking towards the future of VET as well as the Association:

- The changing nature of work - implications for VET policy and practice
- Emerging technologies - can research support planning and the delivery of training?

- The internationalisation of VET
- Enterprise and educational innovation
- Flexible delivery approaches - evaluating outcomes and informing learning, and
- Research and technology, using technology in research - implications for researchers and the researched.

2001: Research to Reality – Putting VET Research to Work

Hilton Hotel Adelaide, 28-30 March

Convened by Roger Harris

In the words of the convenor, the fourth AVETRA conference endeavoured to consolidate the first few years of the Association's work:

The Adelaide Conference Planning Committee believed the time was ripe for exploring relationships between research and practice. In particular, it was time to probe what impact VET research might be having on practice, and how VET practitioners could perceive themselves as researchers and explore research possibilities in their work. Thus the theme of putting VET research to work was deliberately worded. It was to signify not only the close links between vocational education and training and the world of work, but also the desire of VET researchers to see their processes and products of genuine assistance to end-users.

In this year, the conference was planned to coincide with the UNESCO/UNEVOC event also in Adelaide, which allowed a fantastic opportunity to draw in high-quality international contributors and delegates.

The themes for the conference reflected the aims of the planning committee:

- Translating research into practice
- Practitioners as researchers
- Research partnerships
- Lifelong learning, continuous and recurrent VET
- Research for quality improvement
- VET online, new industries, science and technology, and
- Identifying new research directions.

2002: Making a World of Difference? Innovation, Internationalisation, New Technologies and VET

Caulfield Racecourse Melbourne, 20-22 March

Convened by Fran Ferrier

This conference broke somewhat from the pattern of focussing on the role of research to look more at the findings of the research and implications for the sector. However there were still pre-conference workshops on project management, constructing and presenting an academic poster, network mapping, ethics in research and publishing in academic journals.

A number of papers looked at online learning, which resulted in an experimental approach to a late-conference online learning forum. Highlights included the role of new technologies in supporting researchers within institutes, learning from innovation in Indigenous education and the student experience of internationalisation.

2003: The Changing Face of VET

Australian Technology Park NSW, 9-11 April

Convened by Karen Whittingham

The sixth AVETRA conference focussed on the changes and growth that had occurred within the VET sector in preceding years, looking specifically at the changes to VET business and policy. This year saw a very large number of presentations and workshops, indicating the Association had achieved a broad base of support and recognition.

2004: Learner and Practitioner – The Heart of the Matter

Rydges Eaglehawk Canberra, 17-19 March

Convened by Berwyn Clayton

The seventh year of AVETRA saw a focus on the core concerns particularly of VET-based researchers and members: a return to understanding the needs of learners and teachers within VET providers. Similar to the 2003 conference, this event drew a large number of papers and presentations. A greater portion of the papers were not refereed.

2005: Emerging Futures – Recent, Responsive and Relevant Research

Sofitel Brisbane Hotel, 13-15 April

Convened by John Blakely

According to the convenor the theme of the papers and presenters at this conference demonstrated the capacity of VET practitioners to respond to the above challenges. Consistent with previous years, it continued to attract a large number of papers and attendees.

2006: Global VET – Challenges at the Global, National and Local Levels

University of Wollongong, 19-21 April

Convened by Peter Kell

The ninth conference convened by the President had a focus on VET research internationally, including the position of Australian VET research on a global platform. This year also saw the conference held in a location other than an Australian capital city, emphasising the need to

translate policy, practice and research to the local level. Its theme explored the impacts of globalisation on research and education across a range of settings and localities.

2007: Evolution, Revolution or Status Quo? VET in New Contexts

Victoria University, 11-13 April

Convened by Fran Ferrier

For the milestone of the tenth AVETRA Conference, the convenor suggested this event was best placed to explore developments occurring in VET in Australia and internationally. AVETRA members were tasked with looking at what the processes of change actually mean and how research might shape and inform the future. The conference also gave an opportunity for participants to reflect on the nature and character of change and how the interests of teachers, students, industry, government and business might be accommodated for mutually beneficial outcomes. Unlike earlier conferences that had been preoccupied with the status and standards of VET research, the latter conferences have tended to present more of the results of research.

6. Other Events and Awards

AVETRA has administered several awards and organised various events throughout its history in addition to the annual conference. The most consistent and enduring event has been the recently introduced series of OctoberVET workshops. These events are organised on a state and regional basis, and focus on sharing research results and methodologies amongst practitioners at the local level – designed specifically to involve people from within VET providers.

6.1 OctoberVET

OctoberVET was developed as a means of encouraging grassroots membership involvement in AVETRA and the opportunity to engage members between conferences. It was also designed to increase the membership of AVETRA, and to remain as low-cost as possible so it would be accessible to VET practitioners in particular. The concept was originally developed by Barry Golding and emerged from Hugh Guthrie's championing of a professional development role for AVETRA.

Responsibility for each OctoberVET event generally sits with executive members in their jurisdictions who have the capacity to commit their time to organising the event. The executive nominates a member to take on responsibility for the overall coordination of OctoberVET events. In 2006 and 2007 this member was Angela Hill at James Cook University.

In the four years OctoberVET has been operating, events have been held in Sydney (4), Townsville, Cairns, Darwin (2), Adelaide (2), Perth (2), Melbourne (2) and Wagga Wagga (2). From all accounts, OctoberVET is a successful format that is well-regarded by participants.

6.2 AVETRA awards

The Berwyn Clayton Award for Distinguished Service to AVETRA was introduced as a way of recognising the exemplary and distinguished service of nominated AVETRA members who have, through their endeavours, worked towards improving AVETRA's status as Australia's peak association for VET researchers. It was first awarded in 2006 to Karen Whittingham, and will be presented biannually at the AVETRA Conference in even years.

Similarly, the Ray Barker Award for Distinguished Service to VET Research has been introduced as a way of recognising the distinguished long-term and exemplary contributions to VET research generally of a nominated member of AVETRA. The Award recognises significant contributions to VET research and scholarship and the promotion of VET research. It is also awarded on a biannual basis and the inaugural winner in 2006 was Roger Harris from the University of South Australia.

On top of these major awards, AVETRA also announces a Best Paper and Best Paper by a New Researcher at the annual Conference.

6.3 Joint awards

In 2000 and 2001, AVETRA partnered separately with TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) and AUSTAFE to create two awards. They were designed to target different researchers: the AVETRA-TDA award was for people who had completed exemplary research within a TAFE institute within the previous three years; the AVETRA-AUSTAFE award was for people to undertake a new piece of research within a TAFE institute. Both were focussed on raising the profile of research within TAFE institutes, and to focus on implementing findings in TAFE policy and/or practice. Part of the impetus was also to engage TAFE Directors in supporting and promoting research within their institutes, and broadening the number of Directors committed to providing a budget for that research. The awards have been conferred irregularly, and some executive members suggested it would be good for the Association to reintroduce them on a regular basis. The main difficulty with these awards has been the small budget available to AVETRA to publicise them.

7. The International Journal of Training Research

The AVETRA journal has evolved through several stages. The AVETRA journal emerged firstly from the *Journal of TAFE Research and Development*. This journal was published by the NCVER and edited by Professor John Stevenson from 1993. The journal remained with NCVER, and under the new title *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research* continued to be edited by Professor John Stevenson from Griffith University. The ANZJVER was a peer-reviewed journal that published papers from Australian and international university researchers who were active during the 1990s. All articles were double-blind refereed.

In negotiation with NCVER at the time of AVETRA's creation, the journal was transferred to the Association along with responsibility for production and distribution. After long service as editor, Professor John Stevenson retired from editing the ANZJVER in 2002. His efforts and commitment to producing a high quality journal of international status are recognised as one of the key contributions to VET research in Australia. His influence on the shape of VET research in Australia is recognised as one of the most outstanding and long-term contributions and he is responsible for the established reputation of both the AVETRA journal and Australian VET research generally.

After the transfer of the journal to AVETRA, it was partially subsidised for three years by NCVER. Since the subsidy ended, AVETRA has produced the journal from its own resources, though it has proved challenging to cover the costs of production. As the journal is a product sent to all members, production costs are partly covered by the membership fees each year. The journal is available in hard copy, and previous issues are available online.

When it formally became AVETRA's journal, the name was again changed, to the *International Journal of Training Research* and began at Volume 1, Number 1 in April 2003. It has proved challenging to maintain the quality of the publication, with perceived tensions between 'high-rated' peer reviewed content and the need for the Association to also represent the work of practitioners in the system. The tension seems to impact on how the journal is received, and therefore who will submit articles. This reflects some of the difficulties described above that have long existed between some of the university and VET provider-based researchers.

Given the nature of managing and editing the journal, and small numbers of contributions, there have been no 'themed' issues. The journal maintains double-blind refereeing using Australian and international experts as reviewers.

Under its current title the journal has had only one editor, Professor Andy Smith who was at Charles Sturt University until the end of 2007 (now at the University of Ballarat). Charles Sturt University assists to produce the journal biannually on behalf of AVETRA, though the Association meets all the costs of production.

8. Other Publications and the Website

As a professional association, AVETRA has maintained various publications other than the journal throughout its history. Due to AVETRA being primarily organised on a voluntary basis, however, these publications have not always been active.

A review of AVETRA publications and communications conducted in 2000 indicated that the journal, newsletter, website and conference proceedings were most appreciated by TAFE members, less so by university members and considerably less by government employees, private providers, consultants and other end users of the research (Muller & Associates 2000). The review suggested that AVETRA members would benefit from a diversification in the communications of the Association (eg. offering both hard copy and online options).

8.1 *Research Today*

In December 2006 AVETRA recommenced producing *Research Today* after a hiatus of approximately five years. This is currently edited by Erica Smith (at Charles Sturt University until late 2007) and supported by John Rosser, and in the early years was edited by John Blakeley and Ian Falk.

Historically *Research Today* was a 4-8 page publication with updates from the president, NCVET news, conference notifications and reports, and profiles of AVETRA award winners and VET research centres. In this regard it filled a gap in the dissemination of VET research information, and drew together all the relevant notifications for researchers.

Its more recent form has shifted the focus to research itself – in terms of researchers, methodologies and translation of findings into practice. Peter Kell explained that the reinvigorated *Research Today*:

...represents a new maturity in the VET research community as discussion and debate about the field of VET research enters new dimensions. Discussions on quality, impact and the utility of research and its links with policy within the research community are evidence of a new interest in VET research as a field of study in itself.

[*Research Today*, Issue 2, April 2007]

8.2 AVETRA newsletter

AVETRA has also periodically distributed an electronic newsletter to members. The newsletter was considerably longer than *Research Today* and contained more notifications of funding, events and research dissemination. In the past this has been edited by Leesa Wheelahan and then by Michele Simons. Latter editions have focussed more on AVETRA affairs rather than general VET sector developments and notifications.

8.3 AVETRA website

www.avetra.org.au

The main function of the AVETRA website is to provide information on past and future events, particularly the conferences where registration and program details are available as well as all past conference proceedings (abstracts and papers).

In the past AVETRA explored options such as providing a space on the website for researcher forums, but with the limited funds available and mostly voluntary contributions, it has remained a fairly simple access point for information. Currently the executive is undertaking a review and upgrade of the website within the resources available, particularly to make it more interactive for members. As a product however, the executive interviewed for this project did not seem overly focussed on the website. Their concerns remained with the more fundamental issues of the unity of the organisation, its directions and the quality of the journal.

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Appendix A – Project Methodology

A1 – Documentary analysis

The first steps in the project were to undertake a literature review using the VOCED database on key executive members, the annual conference and key publications that had a part in the development of AVETRA (see references below).

One site visit was made to Wollongong to examine the archives available, while other documentary material was collected in the course of discussions with executive members.

This part of the analysis primarily shed light on early developments and the detailed administration of the Association. This included membership listings, conference organisation, and importantly the documents created around the time of AVETRA's inception.

A2 – Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were held both in person and by phone with several executive and some non-executive members of AVETRA. Physical visits were made to:

- Wollongong – interview with Peter Kell and documentary analysis;
- Canberra – interview with Berwyn Clayton, discussion with Sarah Sutcliffe;
- Adelaide – interviews with Hugh Guthrie, Philip Loveder, Roger Harris, Michele Simons, Kaye Bowman; and
- Wagga Wagga – interviews with Erica Smith, Andy Smith, Ros Brennan Kemmis and Cathy Down.

Telephone discussions were held with Karen Whittingham and Barry Golding.