



The Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association

AVETRA Submission to the Productivity Commission:
Vocational Education and Training Workforce.

The Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA), welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission study of the Vocational Education and Training Workforce.

What we offer to the Commission investigation – VET workforce expertise

AVETRA members have completed many significant research studies of the VET workforce. These studies illuminate the issues that have emerged over the past decade and simultaneously provide many options for change and development of the VET workforce. However, as with any body of research, while there may be some agreement about key issues, the pattern for change expressed through these research reports is both complex and diverse.

The strength of AVETRA, as an organisation researching the field of the VET workforce, has always been that it includes a large number of VET practitioners and managers, as well as a large proportion of academics, who are responsible for developing VET teachers and facilitators. The AVETRA membership therefore includes considerable collective expertise in the training and developing of the VET workforce, and in understanding the issues associated with their daily practice and management.

Our submission concludes with a list of significant reports that have been undertaken by our members into the issues concerning the VET workforce. We invite the Commission to use this expertise through further consultation. AVETRA, and AVETRA researchers, would be delighted to contribute to the commission roundtables, provide opportunities for workplace visits, and respond, as individual researchers, where our research may illuminate specific issues raised by the commission.

We would be delighted to contribute both as an association and as individual researchers, with lived experience in the field of training, developing and managing the VET workforce, and through being part of the VET workforce as reflective practitioners.

Who We Are:

AVETRA is Australia's only national, independent association of researchers in vocational education and training.

The AVETRA membership include TAFE and university-based researchers; reflective practitioners and managers from TAFE, Registered Training Organisations and Community Colleges; industry-based trainers and managers; VET decision-makers and administrators; as well as students studying VET. Indeed, AVETRA membership is open to any individual who is engaged in, or has an interest in, VET research and its impact.

Formed in 1997, AVETRA has a secure financial base and a substantial and growing membership. The association provides a number of services for the membership and the VET research community:

- The dissemination of VET research findings through national and local platforms, as well as informing researchers about current research activity through quarterly newsletters and research reviews.
- Facilitating workshops to develop the knowledge and capability of experienced researchers and reflective practitioners within the VET workforce.
- Promoting the development of new VET researchers through a national mentoring scheme and teleconferences (supported by NCVET). Several of the new researcher's studies have explored issues concerning the VET workforce within their own institutional contexts.
- Commissioning studies and investigations to review and collate significant issues from the VET workforce and research communities.
- Maintaining relationships with related research organisations to extend the VET research infrastructure.
- Acting as a voice for the VET research community and independently reviewing and commenting upon VET research policy, priorities and initiatives, while promoting the value of VET research.

AVETRA has been built from a base that includes VET workforce practitioners and those engaged in managing and training the VET workforce.

The AVETRA membership therefore provides a voice for the VET workforce based upon personal experiences, and based upon wider evidence gained through research studies.

Importance of the sector and research platform

It is evident that government, through calling upon the Commission to undertake this study, recognises the importance of the educational sector to the economy and social fabric of the nation (Productivity Commission, June 2010, p.1).

It is also evident that in positioning the VET sector as the *first area* of inquiry, that the government are anticipating the significant contribution that they will require from the sector. A contribution that will help in meeting the emerging skills shortages of the current economic and business growth, and that will help to maintain the considerable export earnings produced by the educational sector, as Australia' 4th largest export market. The VET workforce perhaps models one of the first indications of a move from a 'lucky' to a clever country, and currently is responsible for over 1.5m clients each year (ABS, 2008), and over half of the education export market.

AVETRA would indicate that the continued achievement of these goals will require the VET sector to be underpinned with an permanent and continually effective research infrastructure, that both produces evidence-based recommendations for policy, and influences current practice.

AVETRA would like to indicate strongly to the Commission that the symbiotic relationship between NCVET and AVETRA has been the structural keystone of the VET development within Australia, and the envy of many other nations. NCVET provides a comprehensive statistical database and stimulates the deeper and qualitative field studies that now form a significant resource for VET workforce development.

In particular, AVETRA and the community of VET researchers provide a model that many other sectors might do well to review. From it's inception, AVETRA has been a broad church that has integrated professional researchers with reflective practitioners. This duality has been a significant strength. It ensures that each year the focus of research is grounded in field issues, and also ensures that dissemination of research is not only directed at policy and decision makers, but continually impacts upon professionals in the field of practice. There is no greater squandering of knowledge than at conferences of academics who disseminate knowledge solely to other academics, rather than influencing the business end-users. It is the synergy between academic and reflective practitioners that generates vibrancy in this VET research field, and for the VET workforce.

In terms of the Commission's brief, this integration of researchers and reflective practitioners means that each year the findings of research in the sector permeate VET workforce practice as if by osmosis. This not only feeds into staff development within the sector, but also continually raises the awareness of managers in the sector to the meaning and value of research studies being carried out in the VET sector and within their VET workforce.

Research is important in providing an evidence base for policy making in all areas of VET policy, including and specifically in terms of informing policy about the VET workforce.

Policy informed by evidence based research

In the Issues Paper (Productivity Commission, June 2010, p.3), the Commission specifically indicates that 'evidence and data' are required to underpin any recommendation that can be made to government.

AVETRA would strongly support such aims and would like to make three points in relationship to research-based recommendations.

1 - The VET sector is well served by a significant resource of readily available research material that covers the past two decades and has been source of significant cumulative knowledge generation for the sector (VOCED, NCVER database). AVETRA members have been investigating and disseminating their own VET research studies since 1997, and over one thousand papers focused on VET research are freely available on the AVETRA website. Many of these reports focus on issues related to the commission's remit and the VET workforce.

2 - We are delighted that the Productivity Commission has been asked to undertake this study as such an action will make a significant contribution to the research already available, and position a landmark national study within the VET research archives. Naturally we also welcome the fact that commissioning a body independent from government will result in progressive recommendations to build the sector being delivered to powerful decision-makers. However, it is important to recognise that the continued development of the sector will rely on maintaining and developing the VET research community that year by year encourages VET research, develops reflective practitioners, and strives to mediate local practice and state and national policy.

3 - As researchers we strongly support evidence based policy development. However, it is prudent to recognise that research reporting often struggles to keep up with the ever-quicker cycles of business. We continually report on situations that have passed and moved on. In addition, where we use overseas models or react with new frameworks to emerging issues, often action-orientated approaches might equally appropriate and timely. Finally, as researchers we know that often a move is made to measure those things that are easy to measure. Sometimes it is necessary to build from significant perceptions in the field rather than more a measurable weight of numbers.

AVETRA publishes the **International Journal of Training Research**. A review of just the past three years of articles indicates the contribution that has been made to examining the VET workforce and related productivity issues.

- The productivity challenge in Australia: The case for renewal in VET teaching - Terri Seddon.
- Lost on a pragmatist highway: Searching for a theory to inform teaching practice in TAFE - John Haycock.
- The understandings about learners and learning that are imparted in Certificate IV level courses for VET teachers and trainers - Michele Simons, Erica Smith.
- VET teachers' knowledge and expertise - Ian Robertson.
- The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning in TAFE: Challenges, issues and implications for teachers - Brenda Pritchard, Damon Anderson.
- Practitioner researchers in vocational education and training - Rick Holden, Erica Smith.

In addition, our researchers have undertaken and reported on a very wide range of issues concerning the VET workforce in many other journals and at national conferences. We have gathered an initial list of current publications that can inform the ongoing discussion over the next months about the VET workforce and this is appended to this submission.

The role of Research in underpinning VET workforce development

The role of research in shaping the VET field can be ascertained from the wealth of research reports freely available from NCVET and AVETRA sites. The VET sector has matured from a diverse patchwork of State segregated activities, into a nationally framed, industry responsive, user-focused, multi-pathway market, generating portable competency-based qualifications. The research reports from the 90's now serve as a mark for what was suggested and then achieved.

This repository of previous research studies provides evidence not only of a significant contribution to structural development, but also indicates how so many VET practitioners have integrated their passion for practice into studies of issues that were restraining their practice, and through assessing ways to improve practice. However, we would like to indicate to the commission that three specific research reports provide a response to the critical question – *how has VET research helped in mediating VET policy and practice?*

First, some two decades ago, 'No Small Change' (McDonald et al.,1993) proved that a few words on pages could instigate radical changes in VET research infrastructure and built much of the platform we enjoy today. A decade later, Chris Selby-Smith (1998) described the link between our research and subsequent change in the VET environment as a 'rickety bridge'. It appears opportune that a further decade later Darryl Dymock and Stephen Billett (2009), using an AVETRA grant, have returned to this critical issue and confronted the question which should underpin all our research activity – how can our VET research make a difference?

Contribution of AVETRA to the development of VET practitioners

The Commission recognises the need for the development of teaching skills within the sector (Productivity Commission, June 2010, p.22), AVETRA has established a rich and established culture that has been a significant contributor nationally for the development of VET practitioners. In an increasingly knowledge based economy, it is association with other professionals that generates the circulation of knowledge in the sector, and the individual development of practitioners.

AVETRA is a significant developer of the VET workforce. AVETRA has continually delivered relevant workshops focusing on critical issues such as VET workforce development, to inform practitioners at the annual conferences and local State-based events. Recent AVETRA conferences have explored the following themes.

- Quality and Diversity in VET research.
- Future Research, Research Futures.
- Research to Reality: Putting VET Research to Work.
- The Changing Face of VET.
- Emerging Futures - Recent, Responsive and Relevant Research.
- Global VET: Challenges at the Global, National and Local Levels.
- VET in Context.
- Aligning Participants, Policy and Pedagogy.
- Traction and Tensions in VET Research.
- VET Research: Leading and Responding in Turbulent Times.

In terms of internationalisation, AVETRA conferences have brought researchers and VET practitioners from a range of countries to stimulate Australian practitioners with a diversity of potential VET initiatives. Indeed, the association currently has several international members. Key note addresses been made by senior VET researchers from:

USA/Canada/UK/Germany/Switzerland/Sweden/HongKong/France

Workshops at recent conferences have specifically explored issues associated with the VET workforce such as; the development and training of VET practitioners; qualifications for VET practitioners; managing e-assessment practices; and managing and developing staff.

The association regularly invites other organisations in the VET community to our conferences to enable synergies and integration of development. Recent organisations discussing the VET workforce and research at AVETRA conferences have include AARE, VET Network and Wave, with whom we have established memorandums of understanding.

Over the past three years AVETRA has provided 30 senior mentors for reflective practitioners in the VET workforce who wanted to explore their practice and were supported in their research project by NCVET and their employer organisations.

AVETRA orchestrates a range of initiatives that are designed to develop the VET workforce. The association runs a series of OctoberVET seminars within each State that involves AVETRA members and the local VET workforce practitioners. These serve as developmental forums for reflective VET practitioners. In addition, the archives on the AVETRA website remain open to all VET workforce practitioners who wish to locate read about specific research projects. Finally, each year AVETRA provides scholarships for practitioners to attend the AVETRA conference and disseminate their experience back to other practitioners in their field.

Diversity of the VET workforce – who counts?

The commission rightly indicates in the issues paper (Productivity Commission, June 2010, p.5/6), that the key characteristic of the VET workforce is diversity. We also feel that it is important to indicate the growing diversity of *who counts* as the VET workforce.

While the issues paper recognises that VET practice is now integrating within compulsory schooling, perhaps there is less recognition of the extent to which VET permeates higher education. In some States dual sector Universities manage both VET and Higher Education courses. What is less evident, is how many Higher Education lecturers are directly involved in vocational educational outcomes. There is an increasing blur between professions, quasi professions and job roles that cannot be defined simply by certification level or the traditional blue/white collar divide. An assertion could be made that much of higher education is increasingly directly focused on job roles in specific industries and therefore in vocational preparation. Should they be counted within the broader vocational education workforce?

AVETRA has often struggled to attract and retain training managers from industry, who find themselves in a community of mainly educationalists. Yet, the management of training and learning in industry, in terms of life long learning, is a critical component of the system. It is possible the VET workforce is still seen in terms of training institutions, with insufficient emphasis placed upon the inclusion of the significant industry players who shape learning within our business organisations?

We note that there has been a reduction in the number of University professorships directly associated with the development of the VET workforce. This may a specific strategic target that the commission might like investigate. Research leadership in investigating the VET workforce will be an ongoing need for a vibrant sector in the future.

Funding and development of VET practitioners

However the diversity VET is defined by the Commission (Productivity Commission, June 2010, p.4), the reality of the current situation sees the workforce positioned between two degree based professions. We anticipate, as

previous research has indicated, that there will be a number of submissions indicating the *marginalisation* of the VET workforce.

AVETRA would support the movement towards a more professionalised VET workforce. While our community benefits greatly from a pool of committed reflective practitioners, it remains a small percentage of the total workforce. A restricted knowledge base must place the development of the VET workforce system at risk. Developing the structure of the VET workforce must include developing individuals. The aspiration of a degree-based profession should be a target for the next decade, as a basic degree qualification for VET teachers and assessors will be a significant step in underpinning any movement development of quality and AQF agendas. A professional status would also serve to attract and retain the workforce. If skill development is critical to national economic development, it should follow that those charged with such development, the VET workforce, should be encouraged to attain higher educational standards and be appropriately supported in achieving those standards, and for continuing employment within the workforce.

How such a policy can be implemented for the VET workforce, that will access the requisite skills in times of high demand, will need to be informed by continued research in this area.

Conclusion: a research agenda for the future VET workforce development

It is imperative for the continued performability of the VET workforce that the investment already made in the existing VET research structure is secured, consolidated and developed. The research base that exists is a significant foundation for the future development of the VET workforce.

The VET workforce will need effective research to underpin future change. It is therefore important that resources are available to build the capability and capacity of the VET research community.

Previous investment has constructed infrastructure that has produced one of the leading national VET research communities. There is a need to capitalise on this capability for the continual development of the VET workforce. The Commission's report will be a strategic circuit-breaker, indicating national direction. Continued VET research will be the tactical fuel for each subsequent year, growing reflective practitioners within the system and infusing the system with knowledge

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On behalf of the AVETRA Executive and AVETRA Members.

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