



University of  
South Australia

# **VET research through the rear vision mirror: What happened when Orpheus looked back?**

Professor Roger Harris

Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work  
University of South Australia



**Reflecting back**

**Projecting forward**






# The value of history?

- 'History is bunk' (Henry Ford)
- 'Hegel was right when he said that we learn from history that [people] never learn anything from history' (G.B. Shaw)

**BUT:**

- 'Hindsight is always 20:20' (Billy Wilder)

A side-view mirror of a vehicle is shown, reflecting a road scene. The reflection includes a paved road curving to the right, a motorcycle in the distance, and several trees. The background of the reflection shows a clear blue sky and a hilly landscape. The mirror is mounted on a gravel surface. The text "OBJECTS IN THE MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR" is printed on the bottom half of the mirror's surface.

OBJECTS IN THE MIRROR ARE  
CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR





# Learning from Orpheus

1. Do we take action, face the challenges?
2. Is our craft of such quality to charm others?
3. Do we doubt, lack trust, in those around us?
4. Do we lose our love, and become heartbroken?
5. Are we in danger of being ripped apart by significant others whom we may have ignored or criticised?





**Kangan  
Ramsey**

**Butterworth  
McDonald  
Gonczi, Hager  
Stevenson  
Selby-Smith  
Wheelahan  
Billett**

**Fooks  
Moodie  
Seddon  
Kell**

**Hermann  
Hall  
Robinson  
Karmel  
Thomson**

**Whittingham, Guthrie  
Simons, Golding  
Clayton, Figgis  
Smiths, Chappell  
Burke, Hawke  
Knight, Ryan**

Kangan Report 1974  
TAFE NCRD 1981  
*A J of TAFE R & D* 1985  
*No Small Change* 1993

NCVER national stats:  
providers 1994  
A & T 1994  
employers 1995  
student outcomes 1997  
finance 1997  
VET in schools 2005

No Frills 1992 (N=40)  
PCET 1993  
ANTARAC 1994  
AVETRA 1997

ANTARAC/NREC funding  
Projects  
Key Centres  
Consortia

National Res. & Eval.  
Strategies from 1997  
NCVER dissemination  
strategies



# What would you do?

- Examine what others have said?
- Analyse published articles?
- Scutinize context?
- Analyse funded research project
- Analyse VET conference papers
- Examine theses on VET?
- Compare with overseas research?





# VET research descriptors (1)

- Pre-1974: uncommon (Hawke 2000); lacking in pace and volume, rarely published, very limited in scope, not tackling main problems, lack of research training (Kangan 74/75)
- 1992: sporadic, unfocused, largely unsystematic, insufficient funding, insufficient volume, inadequate dissemination, 'quick look', lack of research culture and ethos (Butterworth), mostly operational (Ramsey); fragmented, little fundamental, big issues ignored, lack of strong critique, lack of research strategy, too few researchers on each topic (McDonald et al.)



# VET research descriptors (2)

- 1993: need to foster quality, increase quantity, little fundamental, no strong critique, not on current policy issues, very few resources (Ramsey)
- 1997: the missing link, hamstrung, more independence, more critical inquiry (Fooks)
- 1998: needs to be more useful (Ellison)
- 1999: too shaped by policy priorities, more friendly research environment, more research training (Seddon); quantum now OK, more relevance and quality, lack of connection with policy-makers, more quantitative studies and evaluations, effectiveness an issue, more dissemination (Robinson)



# VET research descriptors (3)

- 2000: two clouds – question of funding and perceived value to major stakeholders (Hawke); instrumental and evaluative (Stevenson)
- 2001: low success rates for grants, frustrated researchers, research and research community in a particularly vulnerable position politically (Kell); need relevance, high quality, timeliness and methodological integrity, increasingly internationalised (Smith)
- 2002: most projects ‘familiar’, need more on ‘obscure’ research problems (Chappell)
- 2003: significant increase in quantity and quality, emergence of a strong research culture, positive effect on policy and planning, limited effect on practice (KPA)



# VET research descriptors (4)

- 2006: international esteem, 'significance progress', tensions around utility and quality, 'a growing and formidable collection of VET research' (Kell)
- 2007: continuity and sustainability, dependence on HE but lessening research centres, not enough funding, two major challenges: attracting and nurturing new researchers & building vital connections with end-users (Clayton)
- 2008: researchers 'going grey quietly' (Miller); need a good understanding of context as well as research skills (Beddie)



# VET research descriptors (5)

- 2009: useful research, practical outcomes, focus on dissemination, model for impact (NCVER); 'healthy interest in research, highly active research community, international reach, little institutional support, commitment to research patchy and conditional, most applied rather than basic, links with end-users weak (Dymock & Billett); model for assessing impact (Stanwick et al.)
- 2010: impact (Harris & Clayton); outcomes, use of existing data, value of fundamental research and 'blue skies' research, impact (NCVER)



# Research priorities over 37 years

## **Kangan 1974/75**

### *Areas of high priority:*

- The learning environment
- Attendance patterns at TAFE
- Access to vocational education
- Curriculum development
- Cost effectiveness of TAFE
- Student assessment

### *Neglected areas:*

- Teachers / students as people
- Aspects of counselling

## **National priorities 2011-13**

### *Five research priority areas:*

- Skills and productivity
- Structures in the tertiary education and training system
- Contribution of education and training to social inclusion
- Learning and teaching
- Place and role of VET

### *6<sup>th</sup> area of interest:*

- Importance of building an evidence base



# ANTARAC priorities/funding: 1994

- Needs of small business 7%
- Needs of special groups 20%
- Assurance of quality 8%
- Economic impact of VET 29%
- Learning in the workplace 36%

648 orgs. inquired; 261 EOI received; 12 proposals funded

1<sup>st</sup> national conference: *Research Priorities in VET*

- ‘extremely successful’
- ‘marked the first significant step by the Council toward establishing VET as a viable field of research in Australia’ (p.10)



# First National Strategy in 1997

## **Six priority areas for research:**

- Economic and social implications of VET
- Employment and the workforce
- Pathways from school to work
- Outcomes of VET
- Quality of VET provision
- Future issues affecting the VET sector



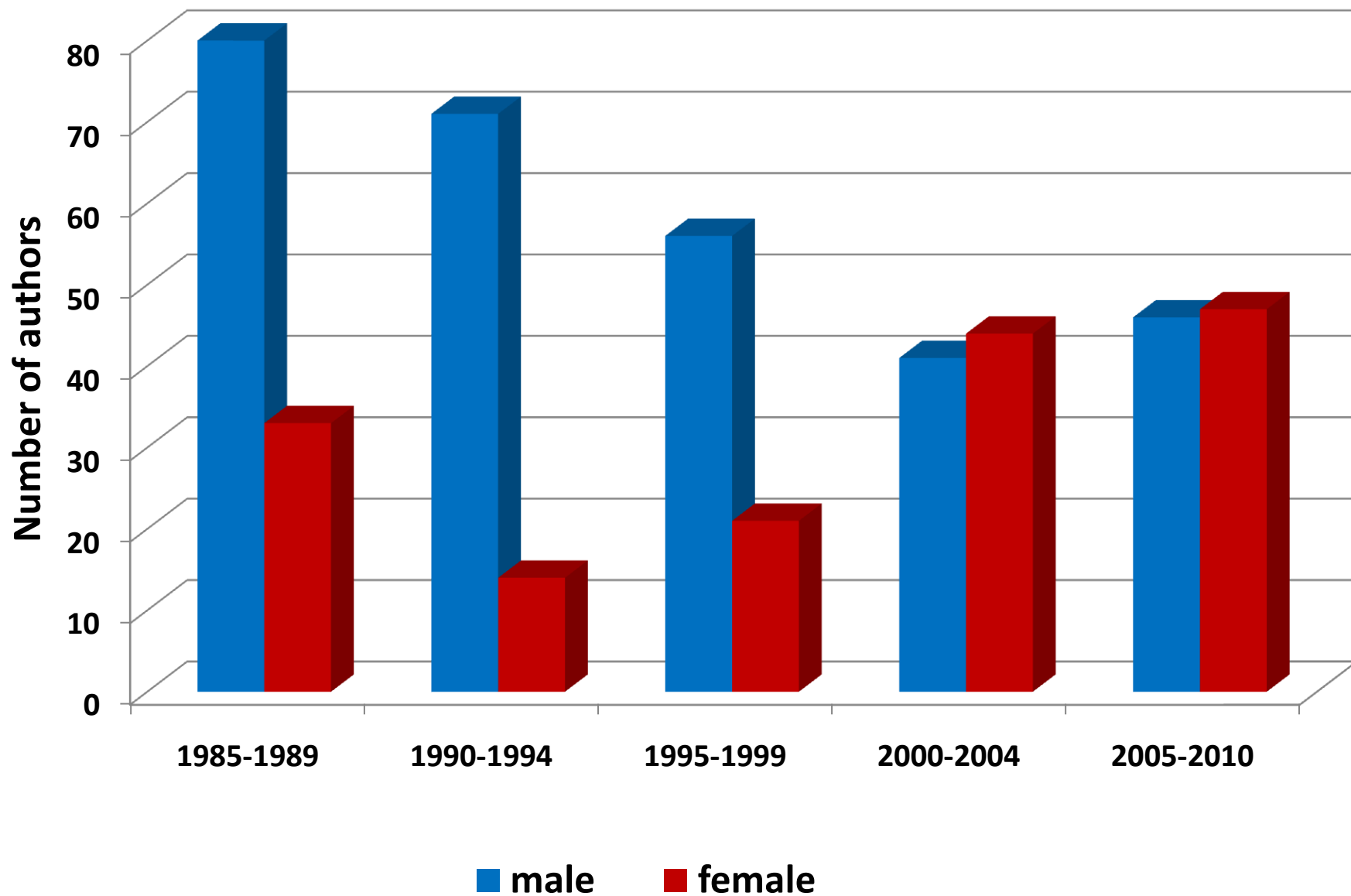
University of  
South Australia

# ANZJVER: 1993-1999

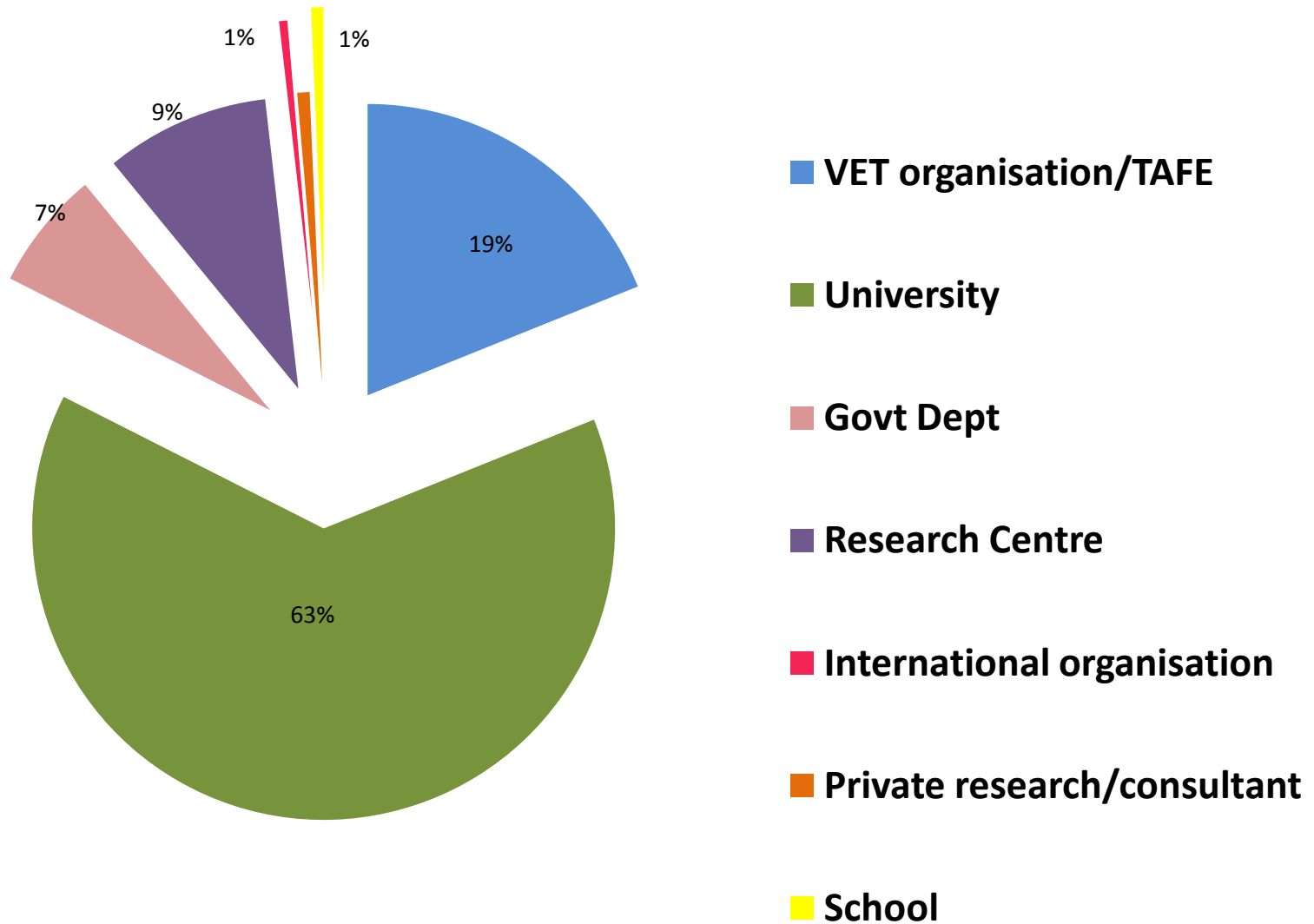
## (Stevenson 2000)

<b>Learning and teaching (n=58)</b>	<b>Policy context (n=26)</b>	<b>Improving research (n=3)</b>
Vocational knowledge, learning & instruction (16)	CBT policy (21)	<i>Expenditure</i>
Student characteristics & needs (12)	Political, organisational & structural change (5)	<i>Building a research culture</i>
Assessment (8)		<i>Improving evaluative studies</i>
Curriculum decision-making (8)		
Training in industry (8)		
Off-job vocational teachers (6)		

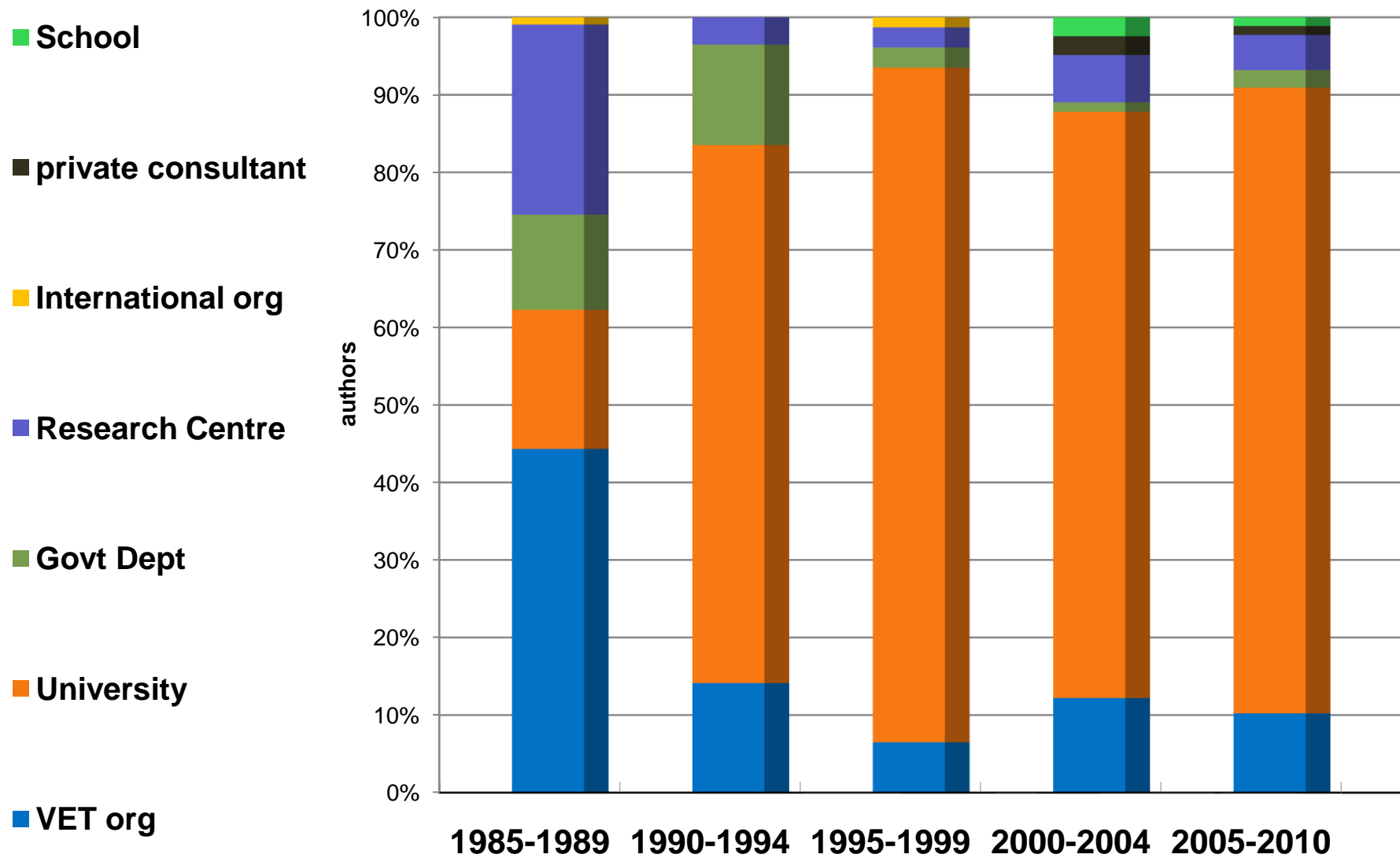
# Gender shift over time



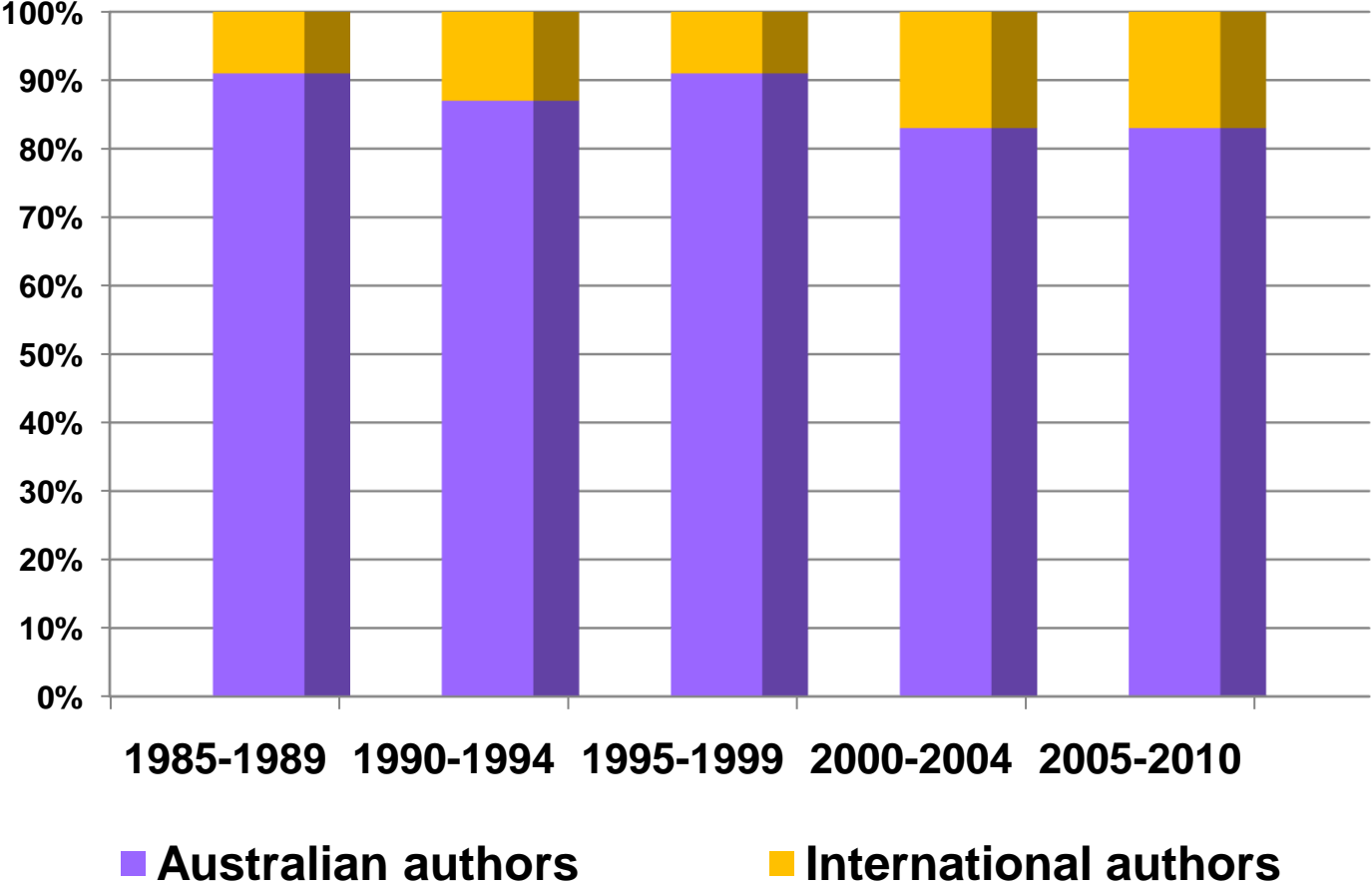
# Organisational affiliation of authors (N=453)



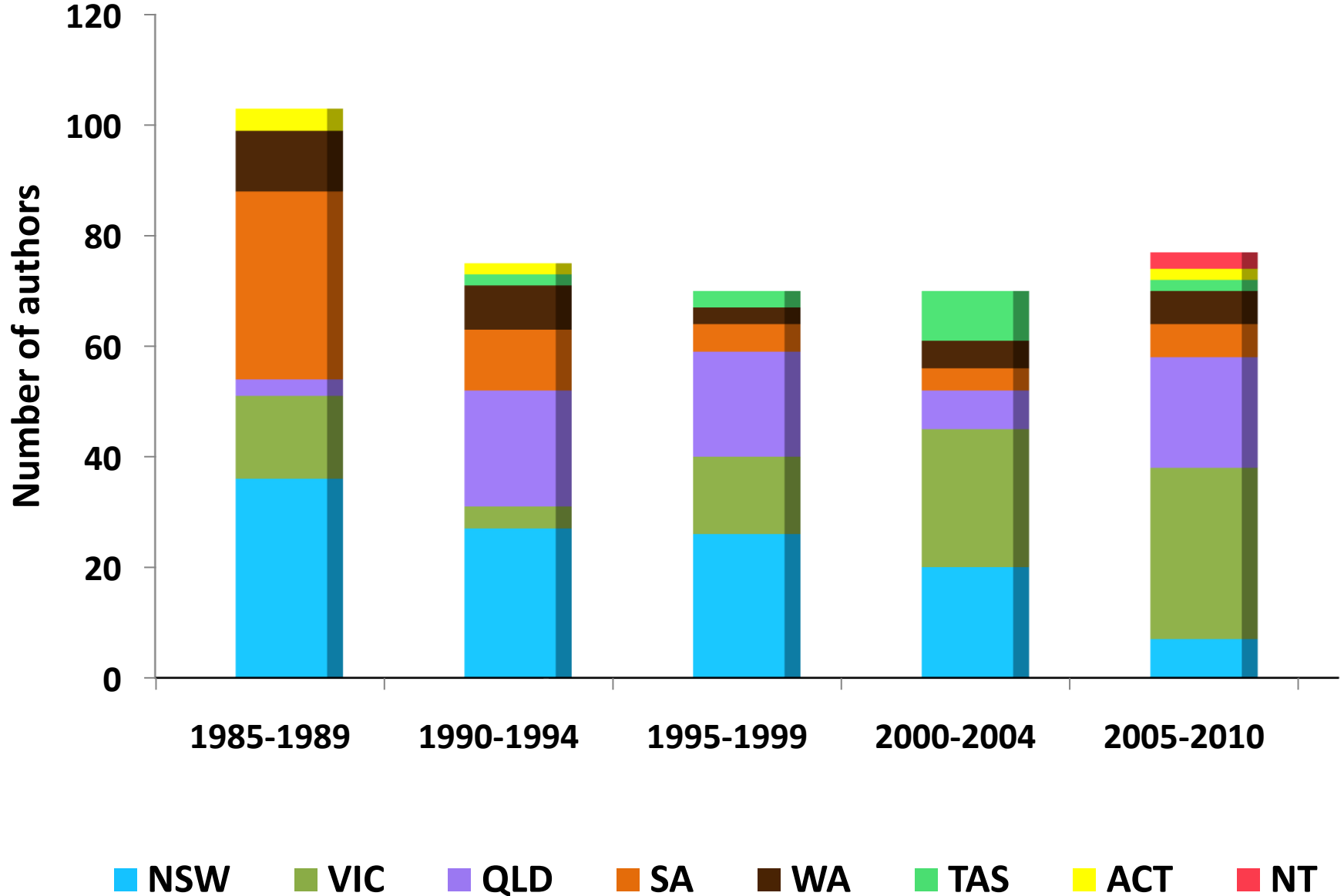
# Authors by organisational affiliation



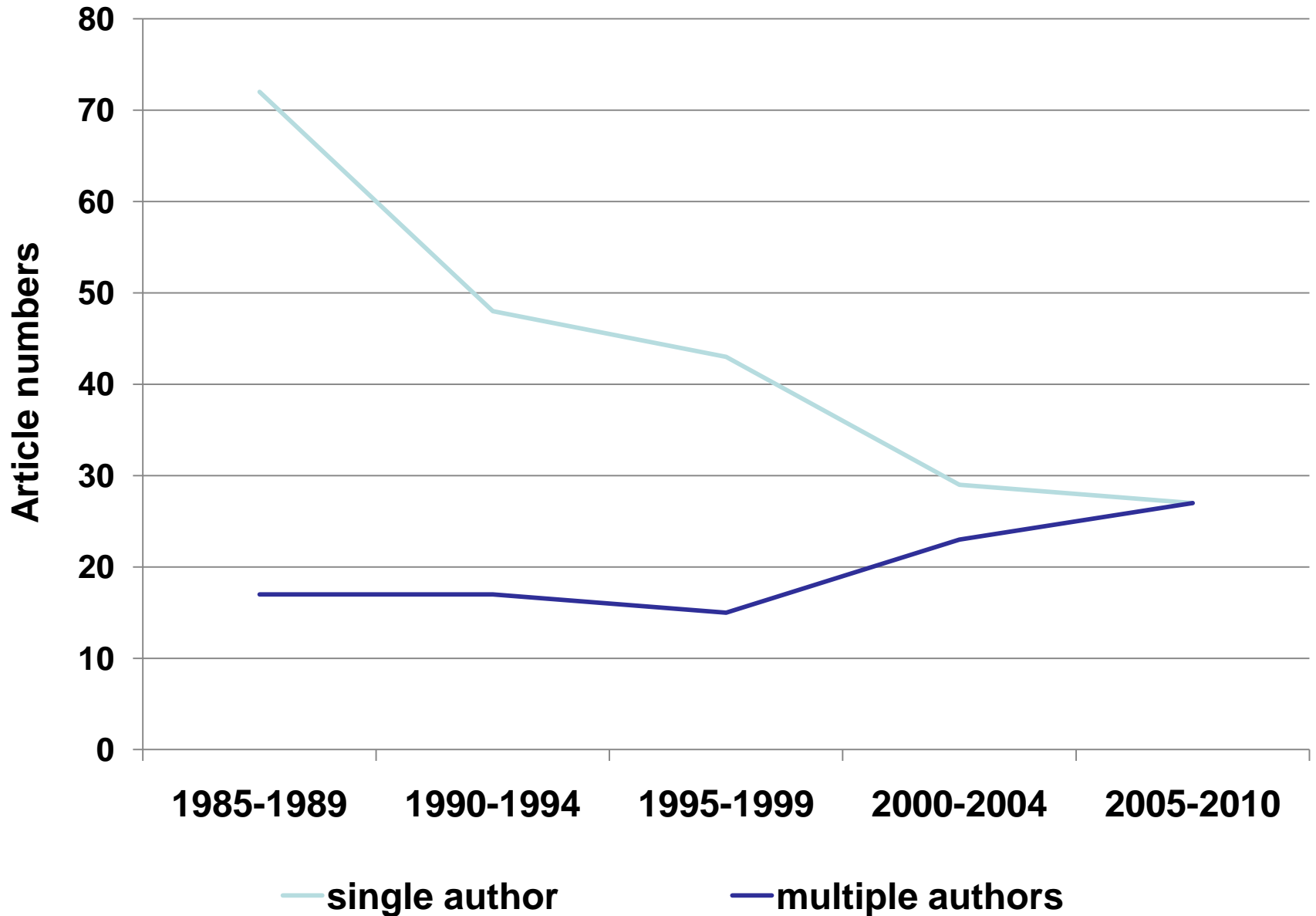
# Australian and international authorship



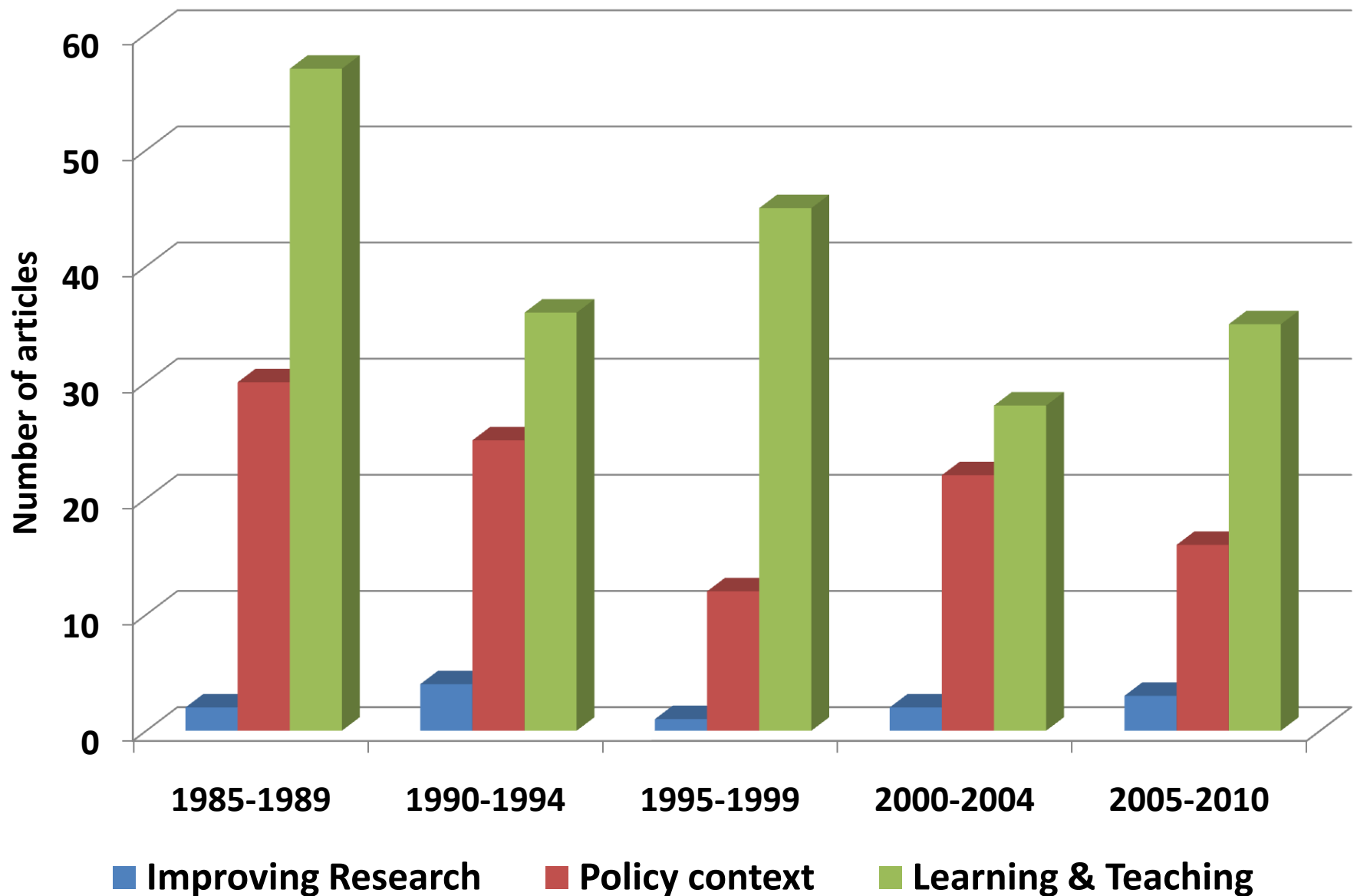
# Australian authors by state/territory



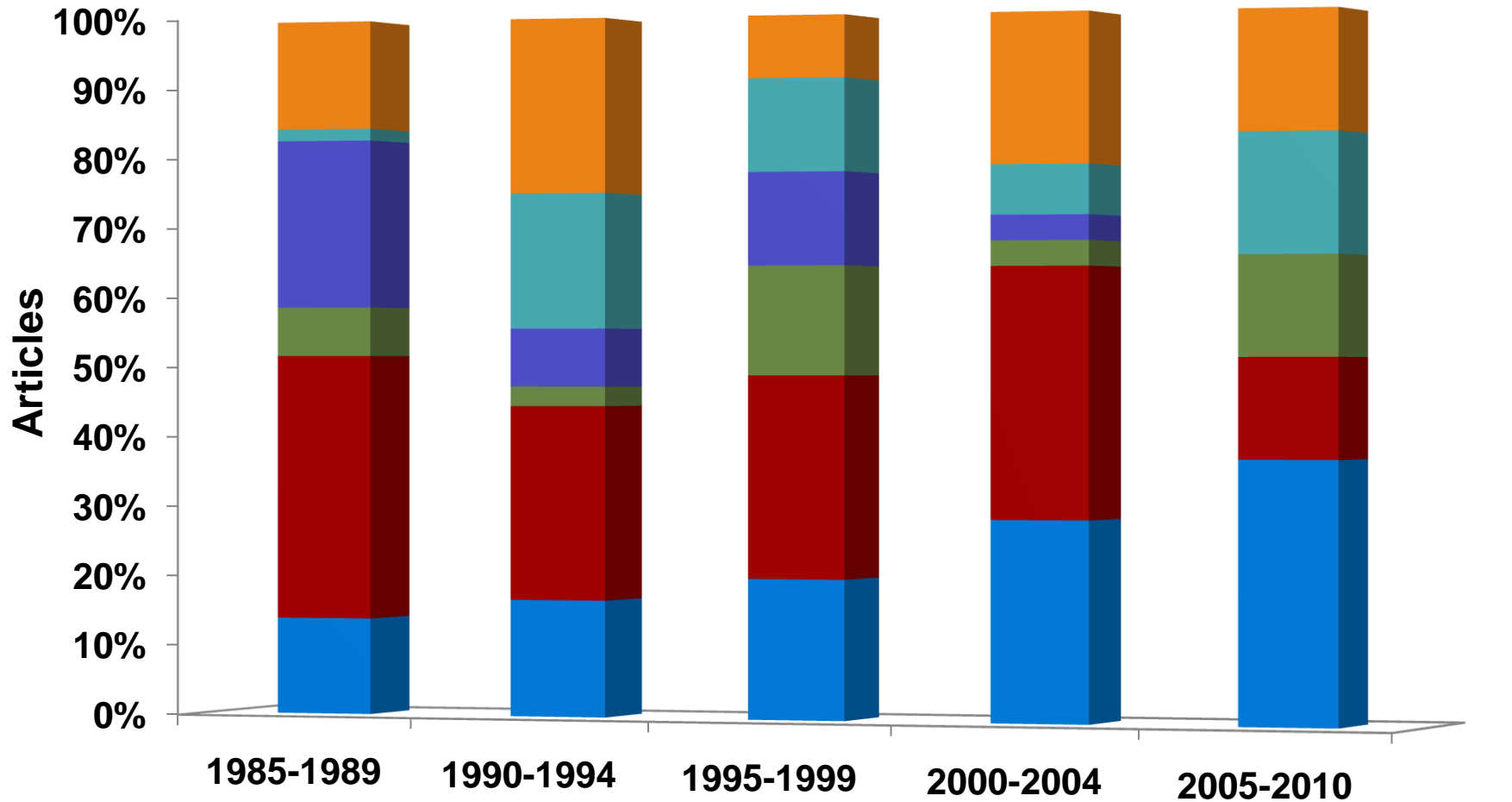
# Trend in co-authorship



# Categories of content



# Sub-groupings of Learning & Teaching



■ student characteristics and needs

■ vocational knowledge, learning & instruction

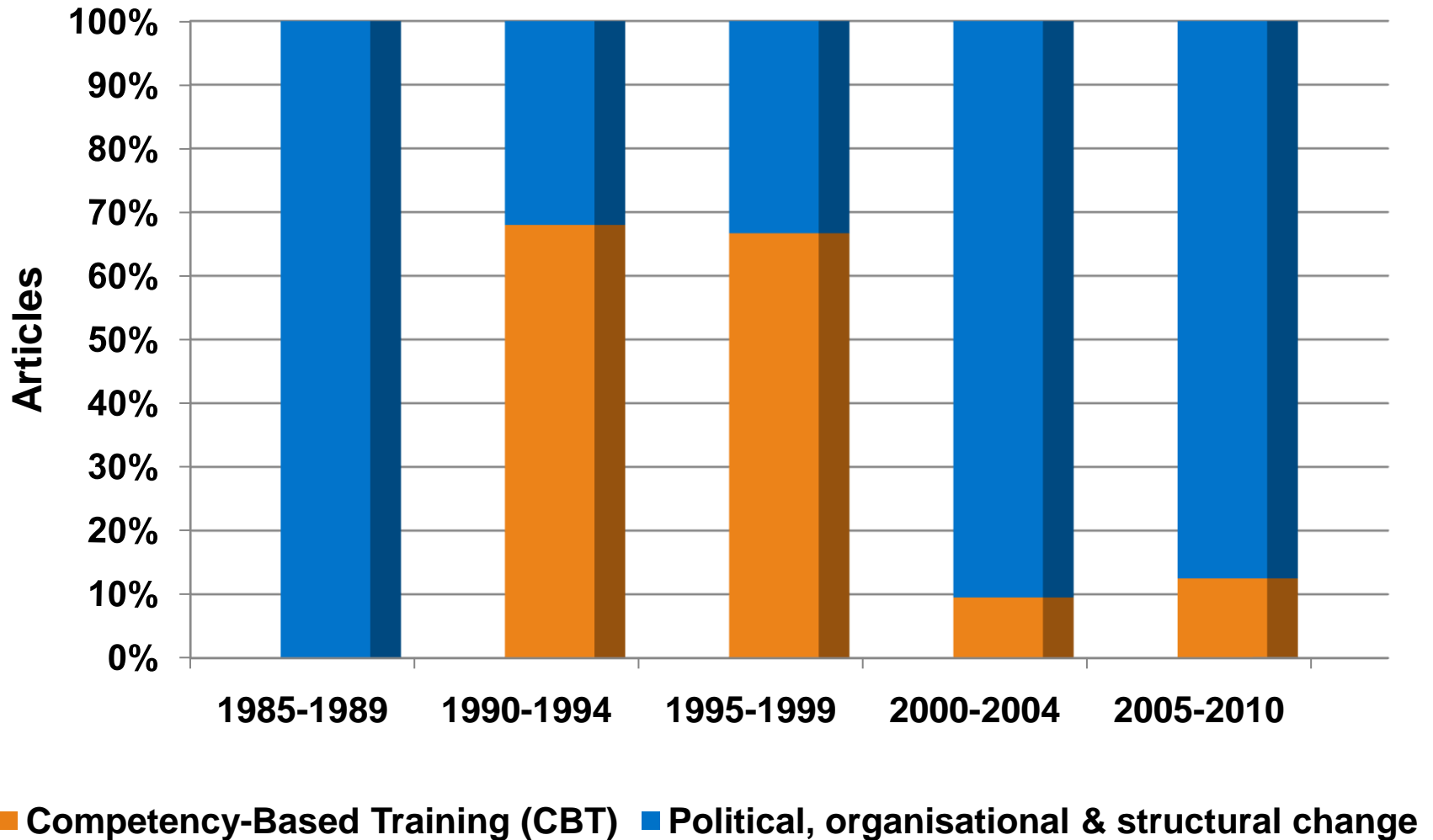
■ assessment

■ curriculum decision-making

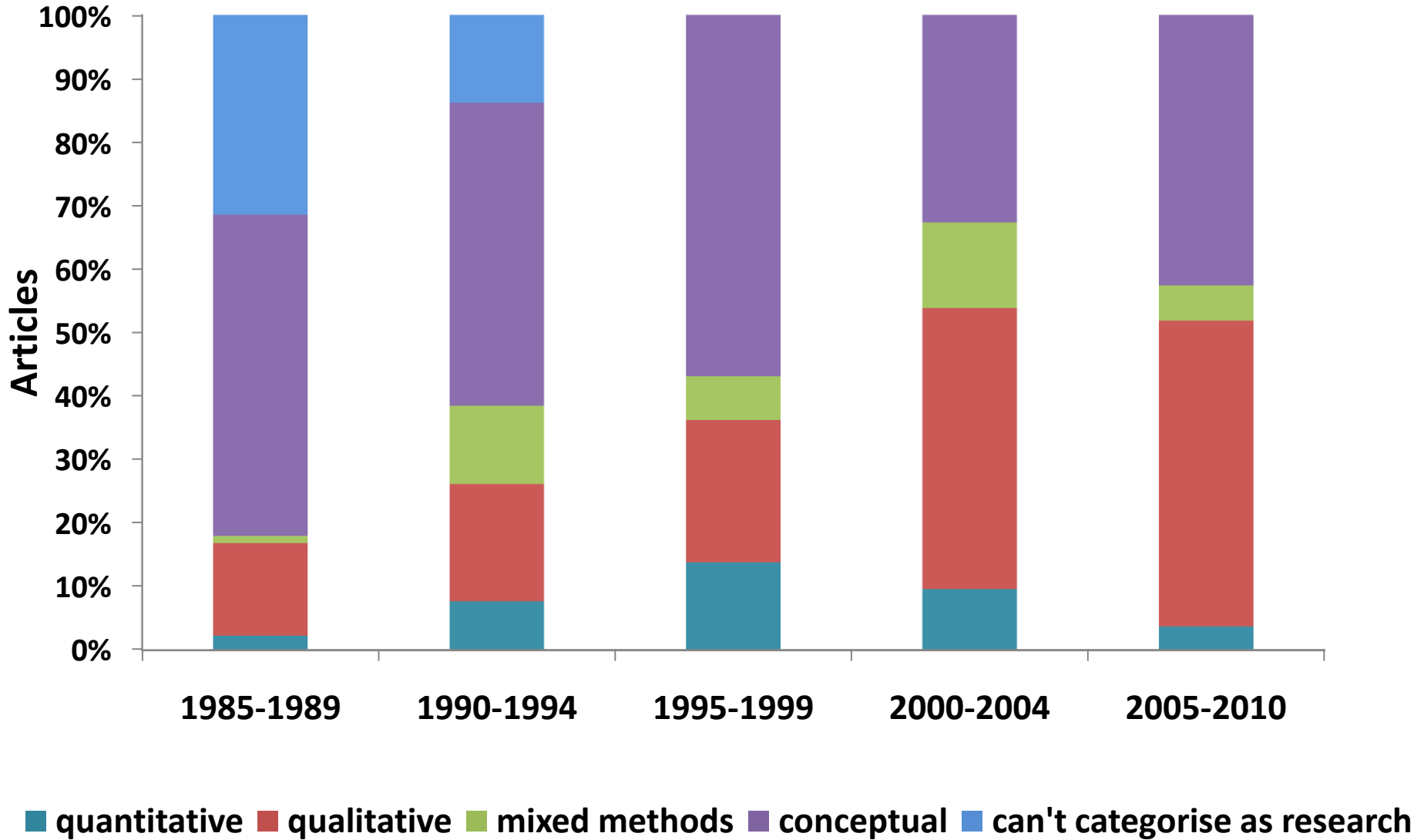
■ training in industry

■ off-job vocational teachers

# Sub-groupings of Policy Context



# Type of research methods used





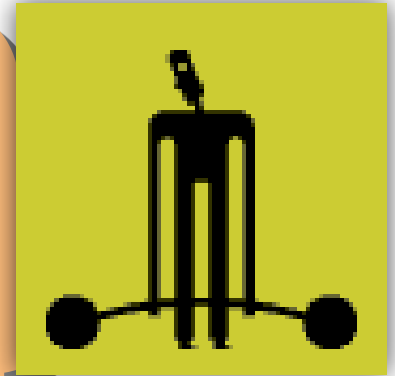
University of  
South Australia

# The key challenges



**Stretching work:**  
Is our VET research stretching intellectual muscles and expanding the boundaries of knowledge?

**Strengthening work:**  
Is our VET research sufficiently robust to stand up to the weight of critical scrutiny?



**Aerobic work:**  
Is our research getting to the heart of VET, strengthening it, and keeping its finger on the pulse?



# Canary down the research mine: 1

1. Has our research been too young and embryonic thus far to be able to do these things?
2. Have there been limitations in the discipline bases of our researchers?
3. Have there been limitations on the research knowledge and skills of our researchers?
4. Have there been holes in available VET data and information?
5. Has there been a lack of critical mass in any one place, and topic?





# Canary down the research mine: 2

6. Has there been a lack of encouragement and reward within our organisations?
7. Has there been a lack of quality publishing outlets?
8. Has there been a lack of incentive?
9. Has there been a lack of take-up of VET research by our organisational bosses and policy-makers?
10. Is the room's elephant really the status of VET, and hence of VET research?





# What have we lost?

- Visibility of many VET research centres
- VET researchers 'moving on'
- PCET conference
- A critical edge
- Policy impact (ever had it?)
- Quantitative studies



# What have we gained?

- National research centre in VET (NCVER) and excellent electronic database (VOCED / VOCEDPLUS)
- Competitive funding mechanism (NVETRE)
- Professional association (AVETRA)
- National conferences (No Frills, AVETRA + OctoberVETs)
- VET research journal (3 iterations)
- Growing international connections in VET
- Awards: Researcher of the Year, Best Paper, and others
- Funded VET research capacity-building program
- Healthy mix of researchers (in various sectors)
- Solid research 'platform' (broader / thematic / collaborative)



# Summary: VET research

- **What?** • What has VET research been about?
- **Who?** • Who has done the research?
- **When?** • When has VET research been done?
- **How?** • How has VET research been undertaken?
- **Why?** • What triggers / catalysts have there been?
- **Where?** • Where have the researchers been located?

*Rudyard Kipling  
(1902)*