

Reflections: 2008 VET Researcher of the Year ...

I was deeply honoured to be selected as the inaugural winner of the VET Researcher of the Year Award presented at the 2008 Australian Training Awards in the Convention Centre in Darwin. I admit that it came as a complete surprise to me and at first it was quite a shock!

It has encouraged considerable reflection on my part on how I have tried to contribute to VET over the past 34 years since my first fulltime position (in 1975) as a TAFE teacher educator and researcher. I remember with some affection my very first research grant, as it came from the (then) TAFE National Centre for Research and Development in mid-1982 to develop, implement and evaluate a “competency-based vocational education” (CBVE) program in an area of TAFE in SA – six years before Federal and State Ministers officially decreed competency-based training (CBT) as a national imperative. The research resulted in two sizeable reports on the first three years of that program at the Croydon Park College of TAFE – a small, yet exciting, beginning to my VET research career!

Coming to VET from the direction of adult education (I am still the editor of the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* after 19 years!), and taking up my new career in the euphoria of the highly influential Kangan Report of 1974, I was naturally heavily impacted upon and imbued with the ideas of that report. The convergence of my research on CBVE in 80s and the ideas of Kangan, and the impetus given by the national imperative of CBT from the early 90s, led me to co-author a book, *Competency-based education and training: between a rock and a whirlpool* (Macmillan 1995) which provided an analysis of the roots of CBT, what the concept meant and how it could be implemented in humanistic ways. I am greatly heartened by the positive comments I hear as I travel in Australia how others have appreciated this book – and who inquire about a second edition! (Oh, if only the time was available!).

I pay tribute to the landmark report *No small change* (1994) which came out at this time. Without this report, and the subsequent funding that it provoked for VET research (under ANTARAC, NREC and now NVETRE programs), my research and that of others would not have been anywhere near as extensive. This funding, allocated on a nationally competitive basis to researchers across Australia, directly stimulated a body of VET research of which we can be very proud indeed. Beginning with virtually a clean slate in the mid-90s, our VET research for the first decade has been necessarily tentative, exploratory and to some extent descriptive. It had to develop a knowledge base. Now, I believe, we have a very solid and fine foundation of research upon which we can all build in increasingly sophisticated ways. When I travel overseas, I know that this body of research on Australian VET is spoken of with admiration.

Today, almost 15 years on, the concern is more about maintaining the momentum and building the next generation of VET researchers. It is to this end that I am coordinating one arm of the *Building VET Research Capacity* project – the so-called ‘academic program’ – together with Berwyn Clayton who is coordinating the other arm – the ‘community of practice program’.

I have very much enjoyed my journey in VET research, as I have tried to contribute in my small way to the development and enhancement of what is a very significant, yet sadly under-recognised and under-valued, educational sector of Australian society and economy.

I believe the inclusion of this particular researcher award in the array of Australia Training Awards already available is a wonderful addition which is another important step in putting VET research on the sectoral map. I hope that I can continue to contribute to VET research in the coming years.

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