

**A-NEWS**  
**The Newsletter of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association**

**June 2011**



**AVETRA News**

**From the President**

Greetings to all AVETRA members!



Once again Berwyn Clayton and her team provided us with a wonderful conference and Melbourne remained dry and sunny for our conference. We began with a range of seven workshops for delegates and for the first time had a session for our international visitors.

The welcome reception was wonderfully hosted by Victoria University in the ambience of their Artspace where Leesa Wheelahan and Gavin Moodie's quality of VET teaching report was launched by the Vice Chancellor, Peter Dawkins. Roger Harris took the first perspective of Janus by looking back at VET and mapping what had been achieved, placing some markers of our progress and naming honoured researchers of the past and present. We had a very full programme with six parallel sessions running through most of the conference and delivering more than 100 perspectives

on VET research, well chaired by AVETRA members. Later in the afternoon, John Rice shifted our focus to a higher plain and challenged us to recognise how our research informs the national patterns of workforce participation and productivity.

The AGM for the first time was well attended and the free drink vouchers seem to have solved the perennial problem! After a special breakfast hosted by Tony Cusack of Innovation and Business Skills Australia we were treated to Gary Wilmot's perspective from Singapore connecting us to both their research development and exploring the links between research and the influencing of policy. We returned to the ballroom to close the conference together as a community. Leesa Wheelahan challenged us with the prospects, fears and trials that lay ahead for VET and VET researchers. Neil Edwards of TVET Australia followed by emphasising the dangers for VET in the new joint regulatory environment for Tertiary Education where universities may set and control the agenda, marginalising VET. Erica Smith and myself responded by expanding on Neil's points. Finally, Arfa Noor told us about the issues of international students in Australia in a way that gave us hope for the future, and we closed the conference with thanks to Aurelie, our ever present organiser, and to Berwyn and her team for giving us an experience of learning, presenting and relating that we will want to repeat again next year in Canberra. I wish you all good researching!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Llandis Barratt-Pugh'.

*Llandis Barratt-Pugh  
President of AVETRA, Edith Cowan University, June, 2011.*

## **AVETRA Member News**

### **AVETRA 2011 Conference papers available!**

Papers presented at the AVETRA 2011 Conference are now available on the AVETRA website, in the conference archives section – at the following link:

<http://avetra.org.au/publications/conference-archives/conference-archives-2011/2011-conference-papers>

### **AVETRA member represents Australia at Commission on the Status of Women – New York**

The fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women took place at United Nations Headquarters in New York from Tuesday, 22 February to Friday, 4 March 2011. AVETRA member, Ms Elaine Butler represented Australia at this important meeting.

The outcome of the Commission's consideration took the form of agreed conclusions, and provided action-oriented recommendations for all States, relevant non-governmental bodies, mechanisms and entities of the UN System and other relevant stakeholders, in order to accelerate implementation of improving the status of Women.

*Phil Loveder*

## **Research and VET News**

### **The end of an 'ERA'**

In recent weeks, while AVETRA was preparing to engage with the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) in a national evaluation of the current 'ranking' of academic journals the plug has been pulled. Minister Kim Carr has as *The Australian* newspaper put it 'bowed to a rebellion' and cancelled the current exercise of re-ranking journals. Which leaves us where then?

The history of the ranking of journals lies in the more than a decade search for ways to measure and motivate research performance. Australia as always looked overseas and reviewed the systems being put in place in Europe and especially Britain to try and regulate research production for universities. First there was the Research Activity Index (RAI) with a measurement of quantity, where the number of papers, articles, research students and grant funding was totalled up to provide the basis for differential funding to each university from the central funds. As we know, the problem with measurement is that the easiest areas to measure do not necessarily provide you with valid assumptions about the worth of the effort. I am sure there are many researchers who have already surpassed the number of papers produced by Einstein during his life time, but unfortunately with less effect. So, government pondered and responded with an attempt to measure quality.

The Research Quality Framework (RQF) was developed and trialled in the 'mid-noughties', where selected work over a five-year period was offered through self assessment and subsequently by peer assessment. The emphasis was on the impact of research upon organisations, society, policy and practice. However, a change of government saw this trial changed to the current Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) system. One of the key issues of the new system of quality assessment for research was the ranking of journals into A\*, A, B C categories. C journals often had a

more practical leaning with B journals being the usual post doctoral goal while A and A\* were the leading international journals often with low acceptance rates, and staggeringly long review periods. Refereed conference papers, once valued in the 1990's were now the lowest category with un-refereed conference papers now un-rated along with professional journal articles and presentations no matter how influential they may have been with practitioners and policy makers.

Of course the initial ranking of journals by the Australian Research Council (ARC) for the ERA system left us with many questions. How valid was a system that was just based on peer acclamation? Rather like the Logies, would not the voice of the people have thrown up self-interested results? How complex was the listing that seemed to take minutes to load as a spread-sheet, and therefore how accurate could it be? Was it the journal that should be ranked when clearly it was the individual quality of an article that mattered? What happened to new journals that had no ranking? Were older journals with prestigious supporters over-ranked? What would happen when you found your treasured article in a previously A journal was now a less treasured article in a B journal as the ranking was changed?

These arguments seemed to have prevailed in tandem with the complexity and cost of the current intended journal re-ranking exercise. It was evident from our own ranking exercise that there was considerable disparity between individual perceptions within our own field about journal rankings. To this of course must be added the complexity of ranking journals comparatively across research fields where social values have to be layered on top of academic values.

To my mind the final assessment is about social impact rather than number of promotions and funding games. However here we still have a problem. Great research has been and will be ignored. As Selby-Smith indicated - the path from research to impact is a rickety bridge, and as Billett and Dymock indicated - the linkage perhaps depends as much on the luck of timing as with the quality of the reporting. Changes of government, national disasters, economic ebbs and flows have a radical impact on national agendas. Are we late, too early, or just at the right time – and how many of us can plan our research to hit government cycles? Research indicates that all too often research is read by academics, and I would guess mainly read by academics in search of support for their own research articles.

What is disturbing is that all too often the voices of influential figures and powerful groups impact more on policy than evidence-based research. Perhaps that is because the focus of measurement rewards containment within the academic community rather than impact in the community. I think that in many ways doing research and selling research are two different skills. It is very hurtful as a researcher when you inform organisations of what is not right and what can be done, and has been done elsewhere to make improvements, and find it is politely ignored. What is equally worrying is the way that the research that becomes well known and often quoted has often been mistranslated in the passage to social acceptance. All management students and much of society nod in understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. How many realise the research was based on the study of primates? Maybe we already do great research but should find more resources and energy to market that research so it has a more lasting impact.

*Llandis Barratt-Pugh, President*

### **The Productivity Commission report - 'The VET Workforce'**

It's all down to the reader, as we good researchers with our knowledge of discourse and translation understand. How do we interpret the findings of the Commission and the implication for the sector we research – where should we be focusing our research attention?

The Productivity Commission (PC – no pun intended) has indicated that there is a lack of trained facilitators in our VET sector, but that no evidence exists for assuming that degree-based qualifications would result in improved productivity. We know that the VET workforce is diverse. Many are involved with learning activities for only part of their 'productive time'. College trainers carry out very different roles from industry supervisors. But is this a good reason to have low aspirations? How can on the one hand there be shock at the low levels of qualifications in the VET sector and mobilisation to fix the issue, and then again no action to develop the full time continuing staff in the sector who will slowly migrate to planning curriculum and managing and mentoring new facilitators? It seems reasonable to me that development of the VET workforce needs aspirational goals that reflect the diversity and transience of the sector. Surely we want our core practitioners in the sector to grow and develop their knowledge of learning as they take on leadership responsibilities.

It is very noticeable that government and their associated bodies want answers to the big questions about global skill needs, workforce participation and increasing productivity. They are only interested in learning mechanisms, support process and equity corridors IF they contribute to getting more people into training, staying in training and then transferring and increasing output in growing and leading edge industries. While the PC report has messages for the TAFE workforce, and some have indicated depressing messages, for researchers I think it indicates how we need to form and shape our research studies to contribute to the big questions that government is seeking answers to. I declare an interest in that my research basis has always been HRD-based and about how we should manage VET activity. I have always found that my work is taken more seriously when the local issues I am engaged with are linked ultimately to how they improve industry/business productivity. Perhaps we must all start locally due to our experience and resources, but linking our research to national questions is critical if we want to have a chance of impacting upon policy and practice. How can we link what we know needs exploring, as practitioners, and what provides evidence that will be of interest to government and policy makers?

*Llandis Barratt-Pugh, President*

### **What skills, how many and where? - VET development questions still remain**

The Skills Australia report presented to government last month 'Skills for prosperity a roadmap for vocational education and training', indicates a number of changes to the VET system, and recommends substantial change to the funding and development of the VET system nationwide.

As with all government reports we cannot be sure what will be fully endorsed, fully funded, stripped of funding at the next crisis, abolished by a new administration, resisted by existing power bodies, diluted by practitioners, die a slow death, or be expanded to change structures for ever.

What is clear is the intention to expand VET by 3% per annum and to increase the numbers of Australians with tertiary qualifications in line with the previous Bradley report recommendations. The stated intention is that basic qualifications to Cert III will be government funded and that after that HECS style arrangements will cut in.

There is significant discussion about the 'Enterprise Skills Investment Fund' that will be formed to fund system development and respond to skills needs. For me, it telegraphs a more competitive environment for funding for the States and Territories, for industries and for the mix of private and public providers. The selling point is that with workforce skill predictions so complex and difficult to compile, the market will encourage more right skills, right time action.

What interests me the most is the move to outcome based funding. Having managed VET in the UK during the 80's I found that what was once forward paid block funding gradually mutated to being retrospective funding for training days for 20% of the funding and 80% paid on final certification. Some management challenge in an organisation specialising in disadvantaged youth!

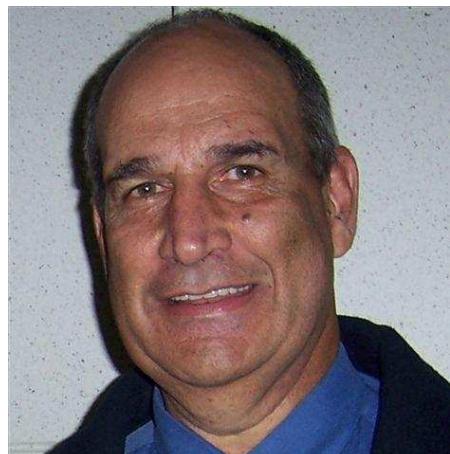
Of course it is natural that the 'My Schools' approach is now to become 'My Skills' for the VET sector with comparative success of providers bared for all to see. One can only hope that the desire to be well represented on the visual ladder is channelled into achieving trainee support rather than figure support!

VET practitioners are also in the spotlight with the push for all facilitators to be Cert IV qualified by 2013. This should see a rush of activity internally in our institutions and companies, but I wonder how compliant industry workplace supervisors will be by that time?

The good news is that VET is expanding. Look over your shoulder to those in other countries suffering significant cuts in the VET area and be thankful. Meanwhile, set some research goals. How will these intentions be changed by the system? What will they achieve? What can we learn from interventions to feed the next rounds of changes?

*Llandis Barratt-Pugh, President*

## A MINUTE WITH Rod Towney



Rod Towney is an Aboriginal Australian, a very proud Wiradjuri man from Central NSW. He has in excess of 30 years working experience within various Federal and State Government Departments. He has held positions of trust at senior levels and his focus has always been on improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal Australians. Rod has various University degrees including a Master of Indigenous Language Education. He believes that Education is the key which can open up many doors for his people. Currently Rod is the Manager of the Aboriginal Education and Training Unit within TAFE Western NSW and is based in Dubbo.

**I first got interested in research:** "For a number of years I have held an interest in various education research topics. I was so excited that my application for a 2011 Community of Practice research scholarship was successful and hopefully my findings will influence policy within TAFE Western in attracting and retaining Aboriginal students within the education sector."

**People who inspired me to do research:** "I am blessed to work under the leadership of my current Institute Director, Kate Baxter. She is very keen to assist where ever possible and enhance the reputation of TAFE Western among the many Aboriginal peoples within Western NSW. Members of my own family have always encouraged me to study and in doing so assist those who may not be as fortunate as I."

### Area of Research:

- What are the reasons why TAFE Western Aboriginal students are not completing their courses?

- What best practice teaching, learning and administrative strategies could be introduced by TAFE Western in order to increase the possibility of course completions amongst currently enrolled Aboriginal students?

**Methodologies I will use:** "An action research project approach where I will be working with Aboriginal students, TAFE staff and community people. Results will be shared as my research progresses."

**Currently I am researching:** "My research topic has created much interest among those with whom I work and comments such as "I can't wait to read your final document - I hope that people will take note and act on what you record".

*Each edition of AVETRA News will feature a special interview with a VET researcher. If you are interested in being featured or you know someone who might – please get in touch with either Sarojni Choy or Phil Loveder.*

## Conferences and other Events

### National Research Forum – Is VET worthwhile? Adelaide, June 28, 2011

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is hosting a national research forum exploring the value of vocational education and training (VET) for low-paid, disadvantaged, young and older workers, which is likely to be of interest to your AVETRA members.

NCVER will pose the question *Is VET worthwhile?* to leading researchers from four consortia at this half-day event in Adelaide on Tuesday 28 June 2011.

The program will include presentations by:

- Professor Barbara Pocock and Dr Natalie Skinner from the Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia
- Dr Cain Polidano and Dr Hielke Buddelmeyer from the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research
- Dr Chris Ryan, formerly of the Social Policy Evaluation, Analysis and Research Centre, Australian National University, and Dr Mathias Sinning, Australian National University
- Dr John Buchanan and Dr Tanya Bretherton from the Workplace Research Centre, University of Sydney

A highlight of the forum will be a panel discussion with Robin Shreeve, Skills Australia, Angela Coker, ETSA Utilities, Sarah Boardman (SA 2010 Trainee of the Year), SA Water, and Tom Karmel, NCVER, who will share their insights and respond to the research, discussing the implications for the VET system. Included in this part of the program will also be the opportunity for delegates to participate in a Q & A session.

For further information and to register, please visit:  
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/newsevents/consortia/forum.html>.

**2011 Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE) Annual Conference,  
'Lifelong learning and community development', Glasgow, Scotland, 29 June – 1 July, 2011**

The FACE 2011 conference is hosted by the Centre for Research and Development in Lifelong Learning at the University of Glasgow. The four key themes of the conference are:

- Higher Education provision and its contribution to community development: contributions may be economic, social, health-related, environmental or cultural, or a combination of one or more of these. 'Community' in this context may vary from one small discrete group through to a whole region.
- *Aimhigher* and its Legacy: whilst this is a particular concern in England, papers are invited also from other parts of the world where there are similar initiatives: these may take the form of reflective pieces from an external perspective.
- The role of Qualifications Frameworks and Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) within community settings.
- Universities and their regional and local role within contracting economies.

Further details can be found at: <http://www.f-a-c-e.org.uk/conferences.html>

**HERDSA - Higher Education on the Edge, 4-7 July, 2011, Radisson Resort, Gold Coast**

Higher Education on the Edge captures the essence of 'seismic' shifts and 'tectonic' transformations occurring in the sector, both in Australia and internationally. Our deliberately ambiguous theme was chosen to reflect the edgy, uncertain and intellectually challenging times we face in higher education.

As well as providing a forum for the voices of academic staff, researchers and professional staff who find themselves at the front lines of a rapidly diversifying higher education workforce, the 2011 Conference aims to push some of the more traditional higher education boundaries by encouraging representation from colleagues in the vocational education and training sector, from schools and private providers. Further details at: <http://conference.herdsa.org.au/2011>

**Australian Literacy Educator's Association National Conference 8-11, July, 2011**

A conference designed to support educators to meet the literacy challenges and opportunities of a networked, multilingual and culturally diverse literacy landscape. Further details at: <http://www.alea2011.com>

**20<sup>th</sup> National Vocational Education and Training Research Conference (No Frills), North Coast TAFE, 13-15 July, 2011**

Sponsored jointly by NCVER and North Coast TAFE, this annual conference is considered one of the best value events on the research calendar. It provides an excellent forum for those in vocational education and training research to network, present and discuss papers on current or recently completed work. Further details at: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/newsevents/events.html>

**Inaugural Regional Higher Education Forum, 2-3 August, 2011, Coffs Harbour Education Campus**

At a time when regional development is in the national spotlight this focused and timely two day forum brings together the leaders from regional universities along with TAFEs and metropolitan universities to discuss the sustainable development of Australia's regional tertiary education agenda. Further details at:

<http://www.informa.com.au/conferences/education/regional-tertiary-education-conference%20>

## **VELG TRAINING, 2011 National VET Conference, 4-5 August, 2011, Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre**

The 2011 National VET Conference will focus on '**Quality in VET**' by exploring the key themes of policy and sustainable business practice and teaching, learning and innovation. Details available at: <http://www.velgtraining.com/national-conference.cfm>

## **TAFE Directors Australia National Conference TDA Conference, 5-6 September, 2011, Sheraton on the Park Hotel, Sydney**

The TDA conference is the annual showcase for Australian TAFE Institutes, providers of vocational education and training and higher education courses to thousands of Australian and overseas students. VET leaders walk a tightrope – VET leadership is an act of balance, requiring great skill and a deft touch. This year's conference will focus on the big issues facing VET providers, including: Industry skill trends, needs and shortages, a connected tertiary sector, Internationalisation, the 'patchwork' economy, contestable markets and the new regulatory framework. Further details at: <http://www.tda.edu.au>

## **Australasian Association for Institutional Research (AAIR) Forum "Let the sunshine in", 9-11 November, 2011, Sea World Resort, Gold Coast.**

This year's forum will focus on engaging and challenging perceptions about what is and what will be as institutions continue to move through these interesting times. The Forum will also include the AAIR Special Interest Groups to provide focus and support for their members.

More details at: <http://www.leishman-associates.com.au/aaир2011/index.php>

## **7<sup>th</sup> Research Work and Learning Conference, Shanghai, PRC, 4-7 December, 2011**

More information about this conference will be available shortly at: <http://www.rwlecnu.org>

## **Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), Positive futures for higher education; connections, communities and criticality, 7-9 December, 2011 Celtic Manor Hotel, Newport Wales U.K. and New Researchers' conference 6-7 December, 2011**

The 2011 SRHE Annual Research Conference will be held on 7- 9 December 2011 and, by popular request from previous delegates, is returning to the Celtic Manor Resort near Newport in South Wales. Celtic Manor, set in 1400 acres of parkland in the stunning Welsh USK Valley, is one of the finest conference venues in Europe offering state of the art conference facilities, accommodation for all conference delegates and extensive and exclusive spaces for delegates to network. The conference will be preceded by a newer researchers' conference. More details at: <http://www.srhe.ac.uk/conference2011>

## **2012 RC33 Eighth International Conference on Social Science Methodology**

The RC33 Eighth International Social Science Methodology will be held in Sydney, Australia. The dates for the conference are 9 - 13 July, 2012. Details at <http://www.acspri.org.au/conference2012>

## Recent Publications

### No more excuses: an industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge / Industry Skills Councils.

Industry Skills Councils, 2011

Millions of Australians have insufficient language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills to benefit fully from training or to participate effectively at work. The Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) believe that responsibility for building the LLN skills of Australians should be shared by industry and all education sectors. The ISCs recommended that, to achieve this, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) should establish an overarching blueprint for action on LLN in Australia 2012-2022 to identify and address long-term goals that will profoundly shift the capacity of learners and the workforce and significantly impact Australia's future. Within the vocational education and training (VET) system, ISCs proposals include: better identification of the LLN skills of learners before training, and targeted funding to address identified LLN skill gaps; the inclusion of clear advice on LLN skill requirements in Training Packages; and an increased capacity in the VET system to support the LLN skill development needs of learners and workers.

### Building innovation capacity: the role of human capital formation in enterprises - a review of the literature.

Andrew Smith, Jerry Courvisanos, Jacqueline Tuck, Steven McEachern, 2011

This literature review examines the role of human capital formation in building innovative capacity in firms. The aim of the review is to develop a model of human capital development factors to be used as a basis for a larger research project where the factors that develop innovation capacity in enterprises will be investigated. The review finds that human capital stimulus factors are developed through appropriate human resource management practices, the learning and development system (in the enterprise) and the tertiary education system. The review also finds that the three key issues in developing human capital for innovation in enterprises are people, knowledge and creativity management.

*We are always keen to highlight research being done by our members. If you would like to have a piece of research featured – please get in touch with either Sarojni Choy or Phil Loveder.*

## About AVETRA

AVETRA is the peak professional association for VET researchers. Its ability to be a sustainable and viable association depends on its membership. Members are urged to continue their membership and to encourage their colleagues to join AVETRA. AVETRA services include:

- An annual VET international research conference
- Two editions of *International Journal of Training Research per annum*
- The quarterly AVETRA e-newsletter with the latest news in the VET sector as well as VET research.
- The new *Research Today* publication twice a year.
- OctoberVET workshops organised by AVETRA members in centres as widely spread as Perth, Darwin, Townsville, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide.
- The AVETRA website with VET research links and information
- Awards for VET researchers including the joint award with TAFE Directors Australia, the Berwyn Clayton Award, The Ray Barker Award, and the AVETRA Best paper Award.

HELP AVETRA help VET research and join now if you are not a member. Full **\$160** (GST inclusive) and Student memberships **\$80.00** including GST are available.

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