KEYNOTE ADDRESS:

ADVANCING VET RESEARCH: DILEMMAS AND DIRECTIONS

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At the first annual conference of AVETRA, held at University of Technology Sydney, a number of questions were raised about research in vocational education and training: What was research in VET? What kinds of methodology were permissible? Who could do research? To a large extent these questions were couched in relation to AVETRA and what counted as acceptable practice within this new professional organisation of VET researchers.

The second annual conference of AVETRA, held at RMIT in Melbourne, was an appropriate time to reflect on these questions, to canvas the dilemmas experience by AVETRA members and to clarify directions for the future of research in VET. My paper provided the opportunity to consider these issues in more depth. I organised the paper as a way of reflecting concerns in AVETRA back to the membership, making my contribution a vehicle for feedback and for thinking about the work that might be tackled within AVETRA to advance VET research.

Importantly, my aim in shaping the paper in this way was to permit multiple voices within the AVETRA membership to be heard in the debate about VET research as a way of clarifying the profile and enhancing the capacity of this VET research community. To this end, first I conducted a straw poll of AVETRA members by email in late 1998, asking for views on the following questions:

➢ What are the dilemmas which face our field of research in VET?
➢ What do you see as the contentious issues?
➢ Have we 'deviated' from original ideas about building an effective organisation and culture which supports VET research?
➢ What future directions do you think we should be pursuing, and how?

Feedback from this simple information-gathering technique was analysed to identify the most commonly expressed concerns and these were illustrated with direct quotes from the return emails that I received.

Secondly, these data were integrated into a broader analysis based upon my longstanding research on the restructuring of education and training (Seddon 1993; Seddon, Angus and Brown 1998), together with particular recent studies of research in vocational education and training (Seddon 1997; Seddon 1999; Seddon and Malley 1998). I make this point to show that the presentation was rooted in a broad educational and social science research framework. It was not simply an idiosyncratic opinion about research in VET.

MEMBERSHIP CONCERNS

Twenty two responses were received from the email straw poll – not a large response but voices from the membership who could find the time and energy to respond to my questions in the rushed days before Christmas. Table 1 shows the distribution.

Location	Frequency
TAFE	7
Universities	8
Industry/ITABs	2

Enterprises	1
Other[#]	4

includes NCVER, government agencies, unions

Four concerns were identified from these responses. I list these below, together with some illustrative quotes:

➢ **Establishing and maintaining the integrity of research in VET**

Constraints of the research agenda imposed by funding bodies. Where is the time for creative work, genuine reflection, consolidation of 'unpopular' thinking?

If you are employed in the VET sector, especially as a public servant, what happens if what you find out is not supportive of government policy?

There is blind systemic resistance to accepting research outcomes which are at odds with the systems view.

The interventionist state appears more interested in commissioning research for the purpose of legitimising its own policy agenda rather than using it as a tool of inquiry.

➢ **The dilemmas associated with the institutional and funding arrangements of VET research**

Incestuous interlinking of ANTA/NREC/NCVER would seem to preclude significant critical examination of VET.

The ways in which public research funds have been distributed - massive amounts to a few institutions, the cutting out of experienced researchers ...

In VET research there seem to be a few established players who succeed in tenders and it appears to be very difficult to break in

While funding for VET research is so short term and ad hoc I can't see a decent long term future for VET research. It takes ages to build up infrastructure ....

➢ **Differences and divisions within the VET research community**

From where I am currently positioned (as a full time research student, and as a TAFE manager) the biggest issue is that many of my colleagues appear to have limited idea about what research is or involves, do not think research is important or relevant to VET practitioners' 'real work'.

The lack of understanding of the non-University members of the ways in which academics need to work if they are to bothered with research in VET.

➢ **The character of VET research**

The TAFE commercial imperative and the university research quantum imperative work against genuine research partnerships.

Higher ed researcher have brought their own culture and debates about what counts as quality research.

How do we encourage exploration of issues by those in a good position to respond to changes if research is done by researchers who are remote from the 'coal face'?

Is research the province of the few? What qualifies involvement?

There is a problem of case study burn out and 'researched to death'.

Lack of dissemination leads to 'reinventing the wheel'.

What is going on here? What is generating these concerns in the membership? What might be done to address them?

Understanding change in VET research

In 1997 I mapped changes that were occurring in VET research drawing on theories of institutions and institutional design (Seddon 1997). Last year Elaine Butler (Butler 1998) presented another keynote address that continued the work of analysing institutional change in VET. We both argued that vocational education and training is currently subject to a process of institutional redesign. Change is occurring partly as a result of broad trends associated with globalisation and changes in the nation state, and partly because of more local politics in which governments have taken up an activist stance in order to restructure vocational education and training towards particular ends. This restructuring is evident in the 'permanent revolutions' that have been occurring over the last 10-15 years. It has changed organisational and funding arrangements, and the identities of those who conduct and manage vocational education and training. Not least, restructuring has produced VET research as a recognisable field of activity and constructed a community that can, to some extent, recognise itself as a VET research community. AVETRA is an obvious outcome of both these processes of top down institutional redesign and also more bottom-up processes of community development and recognition.

In thinking about these complex changes in VET, it is helpful to draw an analytical distinction between institutions and organisation. Gary Bouma (Bouma 1998) defines these as follows

> Institutions are sets of norms which apply across a variety of specific organisations. Organisations are structures of social relationship, social actors arranged in positions and roles; usually, but not always, deliberately arranged and designed to achieve some end. Institutions provide normative environments shaping the activities of organisations. (p. 233)

While institutions and organisations have interactive effects, it is possible to crudely delineate institutions as the normative environment that shapes action and organisations as the particular ways in which social actors and relationships are organised.

With this distinction, it is possible to talk about institutions as a kind of normative environment which underpins or is the medium of organisational life. For example, *organisations of education* include schools, TAFE, private education providers, universities and other organisational arrangements that support learning. The *institution of education* is the normative environment concerned with teaching and learning, the norms and values which privilege the formative processes of human development and the co-production of learning and learned individuals (Connell 1995)

In a similar way it is possible to talk about *organisations of research* including research agencies, centres, universities (although these do more than research), research funding agencies, and communities of researchers. These organisations of research are framed by the *institution of research*, the normative environment that values careful investigative knowledge production, creative problem solving and deliberation and dialogue that leads to the discovery of the best that has been thought and said. The particular historical trajectory of institutional and organisational development of research in Australia is crucial to understanding contemporary research in VET.

The institutional and organisational formation of research in Australia

In the post-war period, research was concentrated in universities (and CSIRO) and these organisations were funded and organised to support academic norms and values. Robert Menzies, for example, described these core values in a speech to Canberra University College in 1939 in the following terms:

> First, the University must be a home of pure culture and learning …'academic learning' as it is sometimes half contemptuously designated, is one of those civilised and civilising things which the world needs as never before.

> Second, the University must serve as a training school for the professions …. A great lawyer must be superior to his technique … He must see himself as one of the creators or guardians of a developing juristic system whose function in a growing and changing world is to minister constantly to the good and just life…

> Third, the University must serve as a liaison between the academician and the 'good practical man' .. it is the almost unknown and badly paid 'pure' scientist who, as a rule, opens the doors through which the Edisons have been able to carry their telephones … There must be mutuality between theory and practice…

Fourth, the University must be the home of research. This is an impatient age. We want results. The work of research requires infinite patience, precise observation, an objective mind and unclouded honesty…

Fifth, the University must be a trainer of character …Asquith [said that a university would be judged] … 'by the degree in which it has helped to raise, to enlarge, to enrich, to complete the true life of the man, and by him and through him, the corporate life of the community' …

Sixth, the University must be a training ground for leaders … I notice here and there a disposition to think that the business of a democratic parliament is simply to ascertain and reproduce the current public opinion .. Democracy demands leaders and leadership. It demands leaders who will not be afraid to tell the people that they are wrong and endeavour to persuade and guide them …

Seventh, the University must be a custodian of mental liberty and the unfettered search for truth … which so far from being opposed, are complementary: each is essential to the other

(Pennington, 1998)

Universities were the main site of research activity and, more importantly, the place where researchers were trained and licensed. The process of becoming a researcher was a process of socialisation into the norms and values of good research, that work of 'infinite patience, precise observation, an objective mind and unclouded honesty' which occurred as students undertook study for their Masters or Doctoral degrees. This academic culture and organisation of the university framed the practice of research. It also shaped the nexus between research and teaching as a key dissemination mechanism. Academics were not only teachers and researcher, they were what is currently known as *knowledge brokers*, disseminating research through their teaching and community service activities.

At this stage, there was no research function in vocational education and training apart from the investigative work undertaken by government bureaucracies in the course of policy-making. The core business of this sector was teaching. Research was first broached in the Kangan report (1974) and reasserted in the Williams report (1979). Implementation followed with the establishment, in 1981, of the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development. This changed its name in 1992 to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. This organisation of research existed beyond the universities. Its norms and values encouraged policy-oriented research on behalf of the bureaucracy which needed a research function to inform policy-making. The post-Kangan era also saw limited development of practitioner research in TAFE, supported by the allocation of research funds (eg. CTEC Designated Grants Program) and the development of journals (eg. *Victorian TAFE Papers*) for reporting practitioner research. But these developments were tenuous and did not survive in formal ways .

This preliminary development of research in vocational education and training was part of a wider trend towards diversifying the sites of research beyond the university. Research in VET was paralleled by increased acknowledgment of practitioner research (eg. action research, reflective practice) in school education and in other professions and workplaces. This pluralisation of research and researchers was driven partly by democratising agendas aimed at opening up traditional academic research, partly by changes in the perceived significance of knowledge and research in relation to enterprises productivity and profitability, and partly by the effects of market reform, decentralisation and increased demands for reporting and accountability which have accompanied corporatism and economic rationalism. The effect was to erode the privileged position of the university as both an organisation and a normative force within the institution of research. This has been further intensified by the universities own restructuring, including mass teaching, marketisation, and a growth of research as service provision.

It is only in the 1990s, an era marked by corporatism and economic rationalism, that resources have been made available to support an extended research function in vocational education and training. Such resource allocations have been encouraged by the increased need for local intelligence gathering required to inform decision-making within governments and VET systems and enterprises. Research in VET has been shaped, not by academic norms and values characteristic of universities, but by these policy priorities, coupled with the advice of researchers who emphasised: the importance of applied research, the need to service a variety of end-users and the value of integrating academic research into the prevailing forms of VET research services (McDonald et al. 1992). The direction was towards an innovative *interactive* research. As Kearn and Papadopolous (1993) suggested, the emerging pattern of VET research linked problem or client-oriented applied R&D with traditional academic research in ways which encouraged the interaction of each tradition for mutual benefit. However, they note,

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There is a critical challenge for the R&D system in adjusting to the major changes which are currently occurring in VET in ways that protect the norms, values and aspirations of research while at the same time contributing to the reform objectives. (p 38)

The institutionalisation of an extended research function in VET was achieved, firstly, through the formation of the ANTA Research Advisory Council and, since its disestablishment in 1996, in the formation of the National Research and Evaluation Committee (NREC). Both these agencies steered research in VET by setting research priorities and allocating funding in ways which supported the development of interactive research activities, integrating VET practitioners, policy-oriented researchers and academic researchers into the existing pattern of VET research servicing of government and industry. The role of ANTARAC in stimulating increased activity in VET research has been turned, with the advent of NREC, to the question of more effective concentration and coordination of VET research. Now, ANTA allocates funding to: pay for private research consultancies; support four ANTA research centres, and support research targeted on national research priorities by individual researchers and other research agencies. These last funds are allocated through NREC and administered by NCVER.

In 1997 I likened this institutionalisation of VET research to the development of a 'theme park'. In less controversial terms, it can be seen as the development of a social space within which a variety of different groups with different interests in, and expectations of, both research and vocational education and training are coming together. The formation of this VET research space has been largely framed by the needs of government in both administering VET and in driving reform within a policy environment that affirms markets and a small steering role for the state. This has meant that VET research has been framed within administrative/bureaucratic norms but operationalised in an interactive way which endorses the contribution of traditional R&D and academic researchers in dialogue with research funders and end-users.

In practice, VET research has been organised in a way that consolidates a policy-oriented research capacity in VET. This has been achieved by tying research closely tied to government priorities through funding particular researchers (consultants, specific university-based research centres, and individual researchers) who provide research services to identified end-users. But this official endorsement of VET research has also encouraged a growing clamour for, and participation in, research related to vocational education and training by other individuals and groups within interests in vocational education and training and/or research. VET practitioners, other researchers, research agencies, enterprises and systems are now affirming the need for research in vocational education and training – and often concerned with issues other than those formally endorsed as government priorities.

The upshot of this historical development is the emergence of VET research as a social space which institutionalises normative conflict between subgroups – VET practitioners and decision-makers, policy-oriented researchers, academic researchers, industry and bureaucrats whose conception of research is framed by different norms and values. As a result, the broad normative frames of VET research that have been sponsored by government, which see research as a process of gathering intelligence to inform policy or enterprise decision-making, are contested, questioned and debated by subgroups within the VET research community with different views of research.

The concerns of the VET research community: historical roots

This historical development of the normative frames and organisations of research in Australia help to account for the concerns identified by some of the AVETRA membership.

Because VET research has been constructed through administrative/bureaucratic processes as a social space in which the knowledge production efforts of industry, academy, and the VET sector can come together to inform decision-making and enhance learning productivity of vocational education and training, there are inevitably divisions within the VET research community. As one respondent noted,

> Is 'we': researchers from universities who see VET research as a lucrative market, an area where they can be big fish in a small pond? VET researchers in TAFE Institutes which want research outcomes that give the Institute a leading edge? Or practitioner researchers from both sectors who see research informing practice and assisting educative processes?

The fact that the VET research community is all of these groups and more – it also includes policy-oriented researchers and consultants who directly service government research priorities and those bureaucratic/administrative agencies that determine research priorities and orchestrate government

sponsorship– helps to explain concerns about the divisions in the VET research community expressed by respondents to the straw poll. The historical institutionalisation of research, firstly within the academic norms of universities and then in a range of other sites in which priorities affirm other norms and values , also helps to explain some of the suspicions between subgroups in the VET research community. It is almost inevitable that in this early stage of the innovative interactive model of research there are concerns and suspicions about whose interests are being served in VET research, particularly in relation to funding.

The fact that the social space of VET research and the VET research community has been constructed and shaped by government policy and funding arrangements helps to explain concerns about the role of government and the way government agencies have both steered and sought to control VET research. This suspicion of government has been intensified by the way government authorities have responded to research in VET. The field abounds with stories in which research findings have been sanitised, research reports have remained unpublished and outside the public domain, and of researchers experiencing personal costs – even personalised criticism – because their research is sensitive or runs against the prevailing policy agendas. And despite a succession of serious and fair-minded commentaries and constructive critiques (Stevenson 1992; Fooks 1997; Fooks, Ryan and Scofield 1997; Meyer 1994; Yeatman 1994), there appears to have been little visible take-up or addressing of these concerns by government.

Inevitably, these concerns about control extend to more general unease about the integrity of VET research. A number of respondents emphasised the importance of research 'without fear or favour'. As one respondent noted:

> There is still opposition in the official policy-making organisations, such as ANTA, to real research as opposed to the narrow confirmatory view that predominates. Until the official view expands, the research community will continue to be the whipping girls and boys.

Another commented on the way research became restricted by self-imposed constraints as well as explicit regulation of research:

> There are three levels of restraint: self-imposed restraint because you have the need to get your next research contract in mind; censorship of reports by commissioning bodies; and pressure or censorship to conform to 'popular' ideas by institutions/employers.

Alongside these concerns, respondents identify critical contextual factors that constrain research in VET:

> Political interference and therefore change is often so rapid that it makes effective research very difficult. This raises the spectre of compromised standards, thoroughness and integrity in research in the name of expediency, and funding constraint ... A vicious circle.

> The sector needs non-trivial research yet the time frames of funded projects seldom allow it. Then there are the problems of trying to isolate cause and effect where there are so many variables. Almost everything we do is major research and time delays typically occur.

> The higher education sector has access to funds which seem to be unavailable to the VET sector. This includes ARC grants which might be a non issue, but also NREC and ANTA moneys which seem to go the higher education in preference to the non-higher education sector. It seem that this is largely based on past performance of individual researchers in the higher education sector and the needs of the funding bodies to be confident that the funds will produce results.

> There needs to be a succinct description of the current set-up for VET across the country - who is doing it, how they are funded, how research subjects are arrived at , what happens to the research after completion ie any evidence it makes a difference. VET is such a politicised environment that such a survey is a necessary first step to establishing an effective research culture in VET because we need to analyse the current situation against a set of criteria for what supports an effective VET research culture - and what works against it

> It should be recognised that the needs and expectations of the two sectors (university and non-university) are different. One is not superior to the other and I feel that this issue needs consideration. Both sectors need to learn to listen. After all, it is only through cooperation that it is possible to get the best outcomes. AVETRA should have a central role in developing guidelines that can help in organising a win-win outcome for each group and in promoting the strengths of both sectors in research!

Future prospects

The establishment of AVETRA is an important step in this developing social space of interactive VET research. Yet its formation mirrors the complexities of the broader field, particularly in the institutionalisation of official and other research norms and agendas. Gregor Ramsay was the midwife of AVETRA and it has been nurtured by Leo Maglen, Chris Robinson, Karen Whittingham and the rest of the AVETRA executive. As an organisation it has the potential to create a valuable forum in which the concerns and divisions of the VET research community can be worked through. This point was made over and again in the feedback.

The challenge that AVETRA faces is how it will be located within the social space of VET research. Will it exist within the bureaucratic/administrative norms of government and the bureaucracy? Or will it exist as a more independent agency with its own identity, commitments and vision for research, and willing to assert its voice/vision in the contemporary politics of research/VET research?

This latter option requires AVETRA to organise in a way which gives its diverse membership voice, and encourages members to speak in their diversity, in order to develop a truly interactive research identity that can assert the legitimate research interests of the membership. This kind of organisation should not mean that any of the subgroups within AVETRA capitulates to any other but that there is learning on all sides to clarify norms and values of research that AVETRA can advocate and to enhance the capability of diverse researchers working in and around vocational educational and training.

There are now a growing body of resources that address the character of interactive VET research that can be used to chart a course for the future, both for AVETRA and for research in vocational education and training more generally. They, for example,

ASSERT THE INTEGRITY OF RESEARCH

> The research mandate must be to think the unthinkable, to reassemble accepted truths into new patterns of meaning, and to identify the sources of problems newly emerging and patterns of action and organisation which hardly exist at present. (OECD, 1995)

> Research should be directed at finding out what is really needed, finding out what is good and bad, and what works best, regardless of the interests of the sponsoring organisation. (Meyer 1994)

ACKNOWLEDGE PLURALITY IN RESEARCH APPROACHES AND STANDARDS OF GOOD PRACTICE

> VET research has to be multidisciplinary. It cannot be the territory of one discipline, research paradigm or methodology. All should have a place in VET research, the only qualification being that the research should be as rigorous, objective and ethical as we can possibly make it (Maglen 1998)

> There are advantages in conducting research in different locations because they each have their own culture, history, reward systems and orientations to research, creating different research outcomes. (Selby Smith et al. 1997)

ENDORSE RESEARCH AS AN OPEN, DELIBERATIVE PROCESS.

> If research is to 'test' certain propositions, or to discover new things about the world, then it must be open to new possibilities, must be capable of responding to challenges to the prevailing world view. (Edgar 1996)

> The goal of research is not to find a right answer but to be a vehicle for participating in a debate about what is right, a vehicle for many to contribute evidence and fuel public dialogue. (Jackson 1996)

> No research can be 'objective' in the sense that it avoids reflecting the value biases of researchers ... So research should always spell out what its underlying values are. Its not so much the 'bias' that should be avoided, but its covering up in pseudo-scientific trappings. (Edgar 1996)

UNDERSTAND RESEARCH AS THE ACCUMULATION OF PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES

The research enterprise is accumulative. Much research does not stand alone but adds to that which existed before. This stock of knowledge exists as publicly available research products and embodied in people (human capital) (Selby Smith et al. 1997)

There is little evidence that research outcomes are validated in systematic ways. There are no obvious public processes for validating research, nor explicit criteria against which validation might occur and little public discussion of appropriate criteria for judging research in VET … The danger with such incomplete implementation of the research cycle is that it can act as a disincentive to research in VET. (Seddon and Malley 1998)

SEEK TO CREATE MUTUALITIES BETWEEN RESEARCHERS, DECISION MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Researchers have an obligation to be committed to the research enterprise, to keep up to date in their field, to maintain the quality of their work and to be willing to engage with their broader communities. Just as decision-makers have an obligation to be engaged with the world of ideas and to think, read and participate in intellectual debate. They cannot expect to make good decisions without thought. (Selby Smith et al. 1997)

Enduring linkages between researchers and research users in VET are based upon mutual esteem and understanding of the contribution of each party. (Selby Smith et al. 1997)

Building a research culture requires organisational change and staff development aimed at creating system-wide and enterprise-based environments that are conducive to research (Seddon and Malley 1998)

These kinds of resources offer a strong basis on which a more effective interactive research can be developed. AVETRA is crucially placed to take up this work. It can engage in research advocacy, encourage a more friendly research environment and support researchers through research training. Through such work, AVETRA can be an autonomous research organisation that works in the best interests of not only researchers in VET but also in the general public interest which seeks cost-effective research to guide understanding and action in vocational education and training.

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