JOINING THE DOTS: MAKING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN VET RESEARCH AND VET PRACTITIONERS

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ABSTRACT

For VET research to be confirmed as a quality product, the outcomes must be useful and useable for VET practitioners and decision-makers. Teachers and trainers especially require research information which is practical, readily accessible and relevant to their needs. More importantly, those undertaking research and those funding it need to examine more closely the intrinsic and extrinsic barriers which exist in current dissemination strategies. To make the essential connections between research and practice, researchers need to understand how, and for what purposes practitioners access research. This paper outlines studies undertaken in nurse education to determine the factors which block the use of research in practice. The approach has application to VET research and practice.

Introduction

Since the publication of *No Small Change: Proposals for a research and development strategy for vocational education and training in Australia* in 1993, there has been a marked upsurge in research on the VET sector . Through the auspices of the ANTA Research Advisory Council and now the National Research and Evaluation Committee, significant effort and expense has been put into initiating research activity and publishing the outcomes. Perhaps now is the time to ask a series of questions about the impact of this research effort, especially in the area of VET practice. Are the critical connections between research and practice being made? How much new knowledge generated by research has been used by practitioners in the field? What are the potential blockages to the acceptance and implementation by teachers and trainers in the sector? Such questions have been frequently asked in nurse education over the last ten years. Studies on research utilisation have revealed much about aspects which deter practising nurses from accessing and using research findings and those that facilitate the transfer of research into practice. Information drawn from the clinicians themselves has gone some way to changing the way nurses feel about the value of research and of researchers. It has also opened up opportunities for understanding the cultural differences which exist between the two groups. These studies have considerable relevance to VET research and practice in Australia.

The research audience: VET practitioners

Not all VET research is directed at practice in VET. Where it is, consideration of the nature of practitioners in the sector is critical. Teachers and trainers working in vocational education, are a disparate body. They are drawn from diverse sections of industry, life experiences and educational backgrounds. They are not employed in a uniform way across institutions and systems, nor do they carry out their roles in a uniform manner. They bring with them into the VET environment such a range of values, beliefs and languages that they can never be considered as a homogeneous body. Because of these factors, researchers are confronted by a research audience which is incredibly complex in nature.

A climate of economic constraint, together with increasing casualisation of the VET workforce and diminishing resources for professional development and teacher education also do not help.

In 1993, McDonald et al noted:

> Most practitioners do not view research as very useful. This applies even more so to vocational education and training than it does to education in general, since practitioners in vocational education and training are much less likely to have exposure to research and its potential contribution to practice in their professional preparation (68).

Given the additional factors of increasingly diverse practitioner characteristics and economic limitations, there is little reason to assume that much has changed in relation to teacher/trainer acceptance of the value of research to their practice. And this would be despite a substantial increase in research funding and research activity for the sector since the 1993 VEETAC study.

Issues in dissemination and utilisation

Considerable emphasis has been placed upon the critical role that dissemination plays in the successful translation of research into practice. In recent times, however, concerns have developed about the effectiveness of existing strategies. Robinson and Guthrie (1998) identify the limited use of primary research products in VET and suggest that the development of derived products tailored to better suit the needs of a range of 'markets' may improve the situation. In *Getting the Message Out*, Morris and Spark (1997) confirm user preference for more abbreviated forms of reporting. NSW TAFE practitioners and training providers were included in this latter research study.

But, is it wise to embark upon major changes to existing dissemination strategies without having a more in-depth understanding of the factors which impede the acceptance and implementation of new knowledge in VET practice? Before taking the step of breaking research outcomes down into bite-size simplifications, we need to ask practitioners what things encourage them to use research, and what discourages them from doing so. Armed with such information, some of the issues associated with dissemination and utilisation may well be clarified.

Examining utilisation research drawn from another field is a good starting point.

Barriers and facilitators: Evidence from nurse education

Over the past ten years a large number of projects looking at research utilisation have been undertaken in nurse education in the United States. They have generally developed from efforts to use or disseminate nursing research to improve patient care. One study carried out by the University of North Carolina is of particular interest as it has application to the VET environment.

In 1991 Funk, Champagne, Wiese and Tornquist began a study to determine nurse perceptions of the barriers to using research findings in practice and to gather nurse views on what factors would facilitate such utilisation. Employing the 28-item BARRIERS Scale, researchers asked 5000 practitioners to rate the extent to which each item was a barrier to their use of research to alter or enhance their practice. Respondents were also asked to choose what they considered to be the three greatest barriers to research utilisation. Items were divided into four sub-scales relating to the characteristics of the nurse, the setting, the research itself and the way the research was presented. The items in each sub-scale are outlined below:

The nurse

➢   is unaware of the research
➢   is isolated from knowledgeable colleagues with whom to discuss the research
➢   does not feel capable of evaluating the quality of the research
➢   sees little benefit for self
➢   feels the benefits of changing practice will be minimal
➢   is unwilling to change/try new ideas
➢   does not see the value of research for practice
➢   there is not a documented need to change practice.

The characteristics of the work setting

➢   does not feel she/he has enough authority to change procedures
➢   there is insufficient time on the job to implement new ideas
➢   physicians will not cooperate with implementation
➢   administration will not allow implementation
➢   other staff are not supportive of implementation
➢   results are not generalisable to own setting
➢   facilities are inadequate for implementation
➢   no time to read the research

The characteristics of the research

➢ the research has not been replicated
➢ the nurse is uncertain whether to believe the results of the research
➢ the literature reports conflicting results
➢ the research has methodological inadequacies
➢ research reports are not published fast enough
➢ the conclusions drawn are not justified

The characteristics of the presentation of the research

➢ research reports are not readily available
➢ the relevant literature is not compiled in one place
➢ the research is not reported clearly and readably
➢ statistical analyses are not understandable
➢ implications for practice are not made clear
➢ the research is not relevant to the nurse's practice

On analysis, Funk et al found that the top ten barriers were all of those relating to the work setting, together with a lack of awareness of research (nurse), and statistical analyses not being understandable (presentation).

A lack of authority to implement changes, a lack of time and a lack of awareness of research were identified as the greatest barriers to the use of research.

The practitioners in the research nominated administrative [and management ?] support and encouragement as critical in ensuring that new knowledge gained through research was introduced to improve nursing practice. They noted that problems with research accessibility and presentation could be overcome by ensuring that reported research identified implications for practice and made very clear the way the results could be implemented in the field.

Research using the BARRIERS Scale has been replicated in the United Kingdom (Walsh 1997a, Walsh 1997b, Dunn et al, 1998) and in Sweden (Kajermo et al 1998). While the findings from these studies were generally similar to the initial US findings, improving the understandability of reports was seen as the most important facilitator by English clinical nurses. From this finding, Walsh contends that the methods and language of communication and the cultural differences between practitioners and researchers are problems which militate against the acceptance and use of much nursing research. To overcome this he suggests that researchers and practitioners must collaborate to:

1. ensure the publication of plain English research reports and articles
2. include research skills in initial training and professional development programs
3. encourage practitioners, both individually and collectively, to strive to read and understand research reports and articles.

In combination these actions will clearly strengthen the links between research and practice.

Utilising the BARRIERS Scale in our VET environment to examine the characteristics of practitioners (and researchers), VET settings, VET research and VET research presentation would seem to be a worthwhile research priority.

Improving the dialogue to bridge the cultural gap

Research findings, if they are to fulfil their ultimate goal, must be seen as valuable, useful, practical and worth accessing. They need to be taken on by practitioners, critically evaluated and then applied to real life situations with the idea that they will in some way positively change their practice.

Teachers and trainers in VET have values and aims which may be very different from those of researchers. Furthermore, the language of research and researchers is not always readily comprehensible to the practitioners for whom the findings could be most useful. As Brown (1995) notes 'it is not only the message sent which matters, but also the way it is received'(quoted in Walsh 1997a, 2).

> Audiences are not passive recipients of research messages. They actively make sense of them, interpreting them in their own way, incorporating them into their own frameworks. Sometimes these

can be at considerable variance with the intentions of the author. Research for educational use, therefore, needs to follow through to see exactly how such research *is* used (Woods 1996, 150)

Individuals or organizations need to fit the new knowledge with their previous understandings and experiences. Sometimes this may require personal researcher interactions to encourage uptake of research and at other times it may require research translators/interpreters to clarify application to practice. Such interventions are likely to have a significant effect on utilisation.

It is, however, important that new knowledge is not presented in an over-simplified form. Practitioner understanding of research must be stretched and challenged. 'An educated involvement with research, a daily transformation (Eraut's term) of research knowledge into practical wisdom is something worth having'(Saunders, 1998)

Thus, dissemination strategies need to focus on:

1. clarifying the target group(s) to receive the new information
2. selecting the appropriate communication medium or media to best suit user needs
3. ensuring the information is comprehensive and timely
4. understanding the differences in culture that exist between researchers and practitioners, and
5. acknowledging the barriers and facilitators associated with successful utilisation

The right decisions about these critical aspects may overcome the blockages to research use or at least modify them.

Although devising a range of alternative approaches is bound to achieve improved interest in the findings of research, it is also important for practitioners and researchers to find the time to share the new knowledge. Ongoing discussions will require a commitment of funds and support from institutions at both a national and local level. The effect of such discourse will be to raise the credibility of research while enhancing the understanding researchers and practitioners have of each other. As Fullan (1994) suggests, good ideas and initiatives for change come together under conditions of communication and collaboration.

Conclusion

While working to improve the ways research can be disseminated and utilised in the vocational education and training sector in Australia, there is also a real need for researchers to ask practitioners the value they are now placing on research. Clarification of what impedes a ready acceptance of research and what things encourage teachers and trainers to seek out and implement new knowledge, will help make better connections between research and practice. The experiences in research into nurse education are supportive of such an approach.

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