

Naming and claiming a research culture in Victorian TAFE

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Abstract

As VET providers move into higher education (HE) in the merging tertiary education landscape, the issue of scholarship is gaining prominence in workforce development discussions. While the capacity to create and disseminate new knowledge through research and publication is fundamental to the role of HE practitioners, the practice of research in VET is less visible and understood. There is little requirement or expectation that VET practitioners will be ‘research active’ and, when they are, they may not have the confidence to share the knowledge for the benefit of practitioners and the sector in general. The Victorian TAFE Association (VTA) was commissioned by the VET Development Centre to investigate what research is being undertaken in Victorian TAFE Institutes to enhance our understanding of the issue and contribute to the broader scholarship debate. The methodology included a literature review, environmental scan, online survey and consultations with a range of practitioners working in six Victorian TAFE Institutes. The findings indicate that VET practitioners do undertake research in various ways but do not always ‘name it’ or ‘claim it’ in the same way as their HE counterparts. If we agree that practitioner research in VET is important, then further investigation and debate is required.

Introduction

The capacity to create new knowledge through research and the dissemination of research through the practice of writing (and publishing) academic papers is fundamental to the role of academics in Higher Education (HE). It links to their professional advancement. Research is an obvious and integral part of their work role. For vocational education and training (VET) practitioners working in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) providers, the link to research activity is more tenuous. They are neither judged for job tenure, nor is their productivity measured by the output of published research. Unlike their HE counterparts, there is no requirement (or expectation) that they will be ‘research active’. Consequently it is assumed that there is little or no culture of research in TAFE organisations or the capacity to undertake it. The perceived lack of a research culture calls into question the scholarly culture of VET practitioners and their knowledge base.

There is no doubt that TAFE practitioners undertake research in various ways (action research, qualitative research, research and development) and for various reasons (teaching innovation, partnering with industry, professional development, technological advances) but they do not always *name* it for what it is; and as they do not often write up their research in academic papers, they do not *claim* their research in the same way as their HE counterparts.

To articulate this position and to broaden our understanding of TAFE research, the VET Development Centre Ltd (the Centre) commissioned **Pam Jonas** from the Victorian TAFE Association (VTA) to undertake this research project. This project was to be a discussion starter for a bigger conversation on the subject of research capacity and capability in TAFE. It would also point to further work and potential professional development activity around this element of TAFE workforce capability from a VET Development Centre perspective.

Literature review

A review of the literature to investigate current and past research addressing the issue of a research culture in VET in Victoria, nationally and internationally was undertaken. This involved the interrogation of websites relating to VET research nationally and internationally including NCVER, VOCED, UNEVOC, CEDEFOP, and the OECD. An internet search for VET research produces a plethora of literature on research done about VET. However a search for research done in VET by VET practitioners, and more specifically TAFE practitioners, provides a more limited spectrum of results. Most of the published VET research is undertaken by academics in universities researching VET issues and VET practitioners. VET researchers appear to be in the minority. As such, much of the research addresses the issues practitioners face – flexible learning, the implementation of CBT, recognition of prior learning, assessment, student access, equity issues and success factors as well as the economic aspects of VET and the system that supports it. Since 1997, much of the research in Australia has been driven by the NCVER through their National VET Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) program. There is a vast amount of VET research undertaken both nationally and internationally which is evidenced by repositories of VET research in Australia such as the VOCED research data base supported through NCVER, and internationally by the OECD, CEDEFOP and UNEVOC While much of the Australian VET research is commissioned, published and collected by NCVER, other bodies also play a significant role in funding and using the research.

The profile of VET research is supported through professional associations such as AVETRA. Despite a proliferation of VET research and VET researchers having a degree of involvement in the sector, the majority of researchers conducting VET research are based in universities. Researchers from within the VET sector and specifically from TAFE are only in evidence in limited numbers.

Methodology

Pam Jonas, from the VTA managed the research project on behalf of the Centre with the cooperation of member TAFE institutes and multi-sector universities. The project focussed on:

- working with Victorian TAFE organisations to explore existing information about research
- working with a selection of Victorian TAFE practitioners to document existing practices, and
- identifying what “research” means in the context of TAFE and the extent to which this research is ‘named’ and ‘claimed’.

The project was undertaken from October 2011 to April 2012 and was designed to complement the Centre’s work in the area of developing a scholarly culture in VET, and what this means for VET practitioners.

The project methodology was essentially qualitative and involved the following strategies for data collection and analysis:

- A review of the literature to investigate current and past research addressing the issue of a research culture in VET in Victoria, nationally and internationally. This involved the interrogation of websites relating to VET research nationally and internationally including NCVER, VOCED, UNEVOC, CEDEFOP, and the OECD.
- An environmental scan of the websites and organisational documents (e.g. Annual Reports) of the Victorian TAFE organisations to identify individual institute commitments to research and to identify a pool of potential TAFE organisations and practitioners for further consultation.
- An on-line survey with TAFE organisations to establish baseline data on the amount and type of research being undertaken.
- Consultations with a selection of practitioners to document the drivers, scope and impact of their research activity.

- Telephone interviews with eight Victorian-based TAFE Specialist Centres. These centres focus on specific vocational areas, for example building and construction, automotive, sustainability etc.

Data gathering on enrolments in Victoria in particular research related elective units of competency from the Certificate IV Training and Assessment (TAA40104) and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE40110) qualifications. While no data have been gathered it is also important to acknowledge that a research component is an explicit feature of a number of the higher education qualifications as well (Guthrie et al. 2011)

Findings and discussion

This project could not uncover any other attempt to quantify the amount or type of research that is carried out in TAFE organisations. The literature search revealed a ‘history’ of research in TAFE in the seminal report *‘No Small Change: Proposals for a research and development strategy for vocational education and training in Australia’*. Authored by Rod McDonald and his colleagues at the University of Technology of Sydney in 1993, *No Small Change* is the most comprehensive account of the state of research in the VET sector itself and in TAFE at that time. The report describes a growing momentum for research in VET from the early eighties. Early grants for TAFE research were made from the (then) TAFE National Centre for Research and Development (the predecessor to NCVER) to TAFE practitioners to investigate a range of issues in and about VET. Venerable names in VET research such as Berwyn Clayton, Stephen Billett, Leesa Wheelahan, Cathy Down, Ian Robinson and Hugh Guthrie, amongst others, also began auspicious research careers while working in TAFE.

No Small Change is widely referenced in subsequent VET research. It describes the state of VET research in the early 1990s as fragmented, underused and with little impact on policy or practice in the VET sector. For the purposes of this paper, the important aspects of McDonald, Hayton, Gonczi and Hager’s work are twofold:

- that it describes a culture of research in TAFE at that time; and
- that the principal recommendation of the report was to create a national strategy for VET with competitive funding, was acted upon.

More recent activities under the encouragement of NCVER’s Building Researcher Capacity Program have recognised the need to reignite research activity within TAFE organisations, private providers and universities. The NCVER Community of Practice (COP) Program, which began in 2008, encourages new or early career researchers to develop their skills as they undertake a project on a relevant workplace-focussed research project. The COP scholarship recipients are supported by NCVER and their partners, including WERC at Victoria University and AVETRA. The majority of the applicants, and therefore the majority of successful recipients, over the last four years have been from across TAFE organisations nationally. The numbers though are comparatively small with around 10 scholarships awarded each year.

- 2010: 9 awards, 6 researchers from TAFE organisations
- 2011: 10 awards, 7 researchers from TAFE organisations
- 2012: 7 awards, all researchers from TAFE organisations

An environmental scan was undertaken and involved an examination of Victorian TAFE and dual sector universities websites to identify their own claims about research and research activity. Most claim research activity and some give examples but it is difficult to identify and/or quantify the activities that are involved. The Gordon, for example, had one page in the 2010 Annual Report on Research and Development which listed four research and development (R & D) activities including a major report commissioned by the institute, the production of case studies on sustainability practices

in an industry sector, strategic course reviews and a submission to the Productivity Commission. Chisholm Institute Annual Report 2010 stated ‘Several (teachers) are recognised internationally for their innovative ideas and research’. Dual sector institutes appear to be more involved in research activity and in the research community, for example, through membership of AVETRA. However, it is not easy to identify whether the research is being undertaken by the TAFE practitioners or academic staff. Research plans or strategies do not appear obvious from a scan of Victorian TAFE organisations’ websites. This is not to say they do not exist but they may be contained in other policy and strategic planning documents not reported on the websites. East Gippsland Institute of TAFE (now Advance TAFE) listed ‘major research and development activities’ in the 2010 Annual Report amongst a list of other items about which ‘details are available on request’. Kangan Institute listed in its Strategic Plan (2011-2018) ‘leading in research and development of new products and services’ but with no further detail. The Work based Education Research Centre (WERC) at VU is the only nationally-focussed VET research centre in Victoria and it is situated in a multi-sector university.

In collaboration with the Centre, an electronic survey was sent to approximately thirty respondents including all Victorian TAFE CEOs, TAFE Directors and a small number of targeted TAFE staff with research responsibilities. The aim of the survey was to establish:

- who is involved in research
- the type and focus of research activity
- attitudes to research
- possible barriers to research, and
- the importance (or otherwise) of a research centre or Centre of Excellence in fostering research.

Twenty five responses were received to the survey. The majority of responses (18/25) were provided by individuals from metropolitan stand-alone TAFE institutes, the remainder were from regional TAFEs (3/25) and multi sector universities (4/25). Analysis revealed that teaching and non-teaching staff were involved in research activity in TAFE organisations. All respondents stated research was undertaken by teaching staff and 75% also advised non-teaching staff undertook research. The sample size (n=12) is not sufficient to conclude whether teaching or non-teaching staff are more likely to be involved in research activity, nor the extent to which the response may be generalised. 7 of the 12 respondents (58%) indicated that they collect data on the numbers of staff involved in research. Of these respondents, around half retain data on research undertaken by teaching staff as part of their daily teaching/learning development role. Only one of the respondents indicated retained data on research undertaken by staff undertaking a qualification in the, now superseded, Training and Assessment Training Package (TAA04) and the current Training and Education Training Package (TAE10) and one retained data of staff undertaking research as part of undergraduate degree programs. In contrast, all respondents (n=6) kept data on staff undertaking research as part of a Masters Degree program or PhD program. Based on the 12 respondents, it appears that the majority of the focus of research activity in TAFE providers is institution or faculty-based and is most concerned with course development or pedagogical issues. However, because of the limited response rate we cannot be sure that this conclusion can be generalised.

Respondents (n=12) were asked to agree or disagree with two statements about the assumptions around the lack of a culture of research in TAFE and teacher capacity to undertake research. A majority (7/12) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that “There is no culture of research in TAFE” and, further most (9/12) disagreed or strongly disagreed that “TAFE teachers/practitioners have little capacity to undertake research”. However there were some qualifying comments which spoke to there being no systemic, visible or widespread culture of research. Rather, there are small groups of research enthusiasts within individual organisations. On the question of *capacity*, 10/12 respondents believed that it was important or very important to build the research capacity of TAFE teachers. When questioned on whether the perceived lack of a research culture and capacity is a barrier to TAFE practitioners working across the HE/VET sectors 6/12 disagreed, 3 were neutral and 3 agreed. On the basis of this sample, no clear conclusions can be drawn.

No respondents indicated they were aware of, or a part of, any research networks. This may be an important issue for developing a scholarly culture as an important part of the research process is becoming a reflective practitioner and having the opportunity to present and discuss your research and research findings with a wider and/or external audience.

A limited number of respondents (n=9) were able to identify support from external sources to undertake research. Almost all of them (8/9) were aware of support being received from the VET Development Centre for research activity in their organisation. Several have also been selected as part of the NCVER CoP initiative. Two examples of ‘other’ external sources for research funding included National Broadband Network (NBN) funds and Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) research funds. 5/12 respondents indicated they bid for external research work and that TAFE teachers/practitioners were included in their bids where it was appropriate and in a variety of roles. All respondents (5/5) target NCVER as a potential funder/research partner. 4/5 respondents bid for work with government (State and Commonwealth) agencies and 2 indicated they bid for research work with industry, universities, private training organisations and disciplinary based agencies such as the Victorian Department of Human Services and Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Many of the respondents indicated they were successful in their bids and provided examples of projects such as DEEWR funding for research into the retention of young people to year 12 especially through vocational skills, NCVER funding for research into educational engagement models for special needs clients and ALTC funding for research in the health industry. This would affirm that they do have the research capacity to support these efforts.

It is clear from the project findings that research activity is happening in TAFE but we are still not sure how much is taking place, what is being done where, and by whom, and with what impact. The apparent lack of any systemic or strategic approach to understanding and quantifying this activity means we could be missing opportunities at a range of levels to capitalise on the value of what is being done. The knowledge/information generated through good quality research provides a solid base for sound decision making and policy formation. With moves towards a more unified tertiary education sector in Australia, Victorian TAFE organisations are, and increasingly offering, degree qualifications. One of the challenges identified by some HE commentators (Wheelahan, Moodie, Billet & Kelly:2009) as confronting TAFE in this provision is the absence of research and a research culture. Clearly from this project, people in Victorian TAFE organisations would ‘push back’ on this suggestion. Research in TAFE organisations does not fit comfortably as it does within academic structures of universities where knowledge production is closely related to career progression. Is there an absence of a culture or are we just seeing culture from the wrong perspective - that is using the wrong metrics to understand and/or measure research in TAFE organisations?

The model of using academics from universities to research VET issues has not necessarily stimulated research in the sector by VET practitioners. The bulk of the research identified in TAFE organisations is by individuals working in response to workplace issues/problems. TAFE-based researchers participating in this project commented they are generally under pressure to show a return on investment to their organisation (or client) from their research and the impact the research will have in practice. This type of research is grounded in field issues of specific interest to them and of specific use to their employer. Its dissemination (or lack of) is not aimed at external policy and decision makers but rather for limited or specific decision making that is organisationally based. The impact of this research on a wider audience is/can be an unintended consequence but is rarely a driver for the research. While an individual research study may have limited direct impact on policy or planning decisions, an accumulation of research evidence could increase the likelihood of an impact being felt.

How can individual TAFEs create and/or the VET Development Centre continue to create the spaces to connect TAFE practitioners and provide them with the opportunity to feel confident in writing and talking about their practice and research? While research in TAFE may not conform to rigorous research methodologies, it is undoubtedly ‘fit for purpose’. A challenge for the sector is whether work-based research is too limiting to produce a significant number of new researchers, and does this matter? Is it important to add significantly to the body of available ‘professional’ VET researchers, or to encourage the development and use of research and research skills by staff in TAFE providers?

This latter aim is, perhaps, more achievable and maybe more valuable to the sector. Around 50 people have participated in the CoP, the majority from TAFE organisations, but the number of people emerging from the program with the clear intention to pursue a research career is much fewer. Although a small number are now undertaking higher level studies, including at doctoral level, this was not what the program was necessarily designed to do. Given that the type of research undertaken in TAFE organisations is challenged for its academic rigour, what credibility does it have beyond the organisations and what value does it have for the researchers themselves beyond their own organisation? There is also the challenge of how far this type of research has an impact on VET workforce practice and staff development activities, or raises the importance of such activities with managers and leaders of TAFE organisations to a level that sees organisational resources being actively directed to supporting research activity. Funding for research in TAFE organisations is clearly limited and there appears to be a constant struggle for resourcing what, to many, is not a priority issue and this has constrained and eroded the opportunities for TAFE researchers. Results of the online survey undertaken with Victorian TAFE organisations and telephone interviews with TAFE Specialist Centres indicated that the area of resourcing research in TAFE and the ‘natural curiosity’ of teachers to pursue research are very limiting factors. There is also a challenge in the expectation on TAFE teachers to be researchers when it is not openly encouraged or easily enabled.

Finally

The dilemma for this project is that it raises more questions than it answers and in some respects, that was what it intended to do. As was indicated from the outset, the objective was not to provide an in-depth analysis of the research questions but rather to establish some baseline information and ‘take the pulse’ of current research activity in Victorian TAFE organisations. This project was to be a platform for the subject of research capacity and capability in TAFE and a discussion starter for a bigger conversation within and without the sector into this important area. It would also point to further work and potential professional development activity around this element of workforce capability from the Centre’s perspective. If we agree that the issue of research in TAFE is an important one, then the need for a more complete and comprehensive stock take of the actual size and scope of research activity in Victorian TAFE organisations should be co-ordinated and pursued by an agency (or agencies).

Some larger areas for research might be:

- An evaluation of the relationship of research activity to innovation, especially through specialist centres and involvement with Co-operative Research Centres (CRCs)
- An assessment of the contribution of research activity to professional practice, and
- The role of awards in motivating research activity in TAFE.

Notwithstanding this, and in the interests of promoting further discussion, other questions could also begin to be asked:

- What is or what should be the place and role of research in TAFE?
- What form of future professional development would support a research role for TAFE practitioners?
- What form of professional learning and/or continuous professional development (CPD) would support research at threshold points during their professional career?
- How does participation in research increase/benefit an individual’s opportunities for promotion or career progression? Does getting a PhD lead to a better career in TAFE or opportunities for a better career elsewhere?
- What part does research capability/capacity play in the development of a scholarly culture in TAFE?

A copy of the full report can be accessed at:

<http://www.vetcentre.vic.edu.au/contact-us/vet-development-centre-reports>

Glossary

AVETRA	Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association
CEDFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NVETRE	National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
The Centre	VET Development Centre Ltd
UNEVOC	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VET	Vocational Education & Training
VTA	Victorian TAFE Association
VOCED	NCVER supported research database
WERC@VU	Work Education Research Centre at Victoria University

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