

# **Institutionally-based research and evaluation to advise change and practice: Messages and lessons from three projects**

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## **Abstract**

Our centre, based in a Victorian dual sector university, is concerned with VET research and development and investigates how learning takes place in, through and for the workplace. We also contribute to knowledge and policy development at our institution and more broadly. In this latter role we conduct evaluations and research relevant to a range of the university's programs. Most recently this has concerned three major initiatives: the introduction of a new approach to trades training, an investigation of the university's Youth Strategy targeted at 15-19 year olds who have not yet completed year 12 or an equivalent and a pilot trade experience program.

This paper critically analyses the final - but unpublished - reports of the respective projects and uses the reflections of the evaluators and their clients following project completion to enrich the information further. The key messages are the importance of systematic evaluation to help sustain or improve such programs and initiatives, and to help effect innovation and change (Fullan 1991). However, the methodologies used need to be grounded in the realities of the local milieu, and can be limited by them. The paper gives weight to the importance of having skilled and arms-length evaluative and research capacity within VET providers.

## **Introduction, context and approach**

A recent paper commissioned by Victoria's VET Development Centre describes the nature and extent of research programs within Victorian TAFE institutions (VET Development Centre 2012). The paper highlights the issue of research capability and capacity in VET, and notes that its use is dependent on the culture of the institution concerned and the extent to which such activities are valued. Research in Australian VET (and particularly at institutional level) is a broadly conceived concept, but is most often applied, strategic or action based in its nature and approach (Guthrie forthcoming). Likewise evaluation, which uses a range of research approaches, focuses on the judgement of merit - for example judging the merit of a policy, a program, a training module etc. It may also be used to guide the development of policies, programs or practices in a formative sense or, alternatively, to help make decisions for summative or accountability purposes - including whether or not a policy, program or practice should be continued (Guthrie forthcoming). In VET institutions such research and evaluation is done by, or with, insiders to the organisation. It is focused on addressing a particular internal issue or problem and is deliberately and systematically undertaken through an appropriate evidence gathering processes, and with a desired outcome of change or improvement (VET Development Centre 2012).

However, change is often a political process motivated by imperatives and circumstances arising within and/or outside the organisation. Fullan (1991) notes that

change may be imposed - or seems to be so. Alternatively, it can be an activity in which organisations and individuals voluntarily and willingly engage. Thus the personal and collective experience of change may, on the one hand, be characterised by uncertainty, anxiety, struggle and even martyrdom or, on the other, by a sense of shared vision building and collaboration, mastery, accomplishment and professional growth. Typically there can be strong resistance to it, with change being particularly resented when it is seen as being unnecessary, poorly conceived, imposed, too big, too rapid or too wide-ranging. The natural reaction in such circumstances is to try to preserve the status quo as much as possible.

The Work-based Education Research Centre (WERC) is part of the Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning at Victoria University (VU) - a dual sector tertiary institution. The centre undertakes VET research and development and investigates how learning takes place in, through and for the workplace. WERC also contributes to knowledge and policy development at Victoria University and more broadly. A significant role is to conduct evaluations and research relevant to a range of the university's programs, especially those up to Certificate IV level. This role is supported by the university's agenda for organisational reform and has two relevant and specific foci. The first is excellence - both in terms of the quality of VU's learning and teaching and the student experience. The second is accessibility, that is: aiming to be an institution that is accessible to all students from diverse countries, cultures, socio-economic and educational backgrounds (Victoria University 2012a, p.9). To ensure this occurs involves using evidence-based practice and formal evaluation as part of its approach to achieving curriculum reform and improving quality (Victoria University 2012b).

There is little point in undertaking evaluations of institutional policy and practice if the evaluative process is not concerned with effecting change or improving practice or - worst of all - if the findings are not used. The evaluation approach used by WERC is utilization focused (Patton 2012). This means that the evaluation design and process is concerned with "... how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experience the evaluation process" by which "the evaluation facilitator develops a working relationship with intended users to help them determine what kind of evaluation they need" (Patton, 2012, p. 4). Utilisation-focused evaluation can have a wide variety of purposes (formative, summative, developmental), and uses appropriate methodologies rather than being tied to a particular evaluation theory, information source or approach.

While Patton's work has provided considerable inspiration to the evaluation approaches used other evaluators have also contributed to WERC's thinking. Notable amongst these is Stufflebeam's Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) approach (Stufflebeam 2003), which is configured to help guide internally-based institutional as well as self-evaluations which are improvement oriented. In addition, the evaluation design manual for educators and trainers developed by Brinkerhoff and his colleagues (Brinkerhoff et al. 1983) and focused on planning, doing and using evaluations has been an influential and useful tool.

Over the last year, 2012, WERC has been involved in evaluating three major initiatives, namely:

1. The introduction of Victoria University's new approach to trades training - TradeApps
2. An evaluation of the university's youth strategy, and
3. Evaluating a pilot trade experience program.

Some contextual information about each of these evaluations is provided below.

#### *Evaluating TradeApps*

The impetus for this initiative has been driven by a mix of local and national factors, including increased competition from other providers and the need to provide students and employers with better targeted and more flexible approaches to apprentice and post-apprenticeship training. This change process has involved introducing major shifts in how staff teach and how their students learn, including clustering the units of competency in the relevant Training Packages and opening up opportunities for more training and assessment to occur in the workplace. Another vital component has been up-skilling and re-skilling trades teachers to design and deliver apprentice training, including their approaches to assessment. Finally, the TradeApps concept recognises that successful apprenticeship completions are the result of effective relationships between the training organisation, the employer and the apprentice. The evaluation involved a mixed methods approach which involved conducting a series of focus groups and interviews with students, teachers, apprenticeship centres and employers in a range of trade areas as well as interviews with key VU staff involved in supporting the initiative.

#### *Evaluating the Youth Strategy*

The university's Youth Strategy was targeted at 15-19 year olds who have not yet completed year 12 or an equivalent. These early school leavers were enrolled in courses ranging from Pre-Apprentice, Traineeships, Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and other Certificate-level qualifications. Victoria University's Youth Strategy has been developed to support these students to ensure they achieve a pre-vocational or vocational qualification. The aim is to provide pathways to Certificate III and above qualifications; language, literacy and numeracy support to ensure young people are able to engage in learning during the program and in the future; embedded career education; youth support; learning plans and youth-friendly learning experiences and environments. The evaluation process involved the development and administration of staff and student surveys in successive years (2011 and 2012).

#### *Evaluating the pilot trades experience program*

And finally, a pilot trade experience program was set up involving a range of trades: plumbing, carpentry, bricklaying and hospitality, integrated with an intermediate or senior VCAL award. The delivery approach used a project-based model of learning which involves developing literacy, numeracy and life skills. The life skills included career and career planning, health and fitness and business and technology. The evaluation approach was participant focused and involved a brief questionnaire and focus group interview with all students in the pilot program.

### *This paper*

The paper presents the major practical lessons from these utilization-based and internally-focused evaluations. It has been written from the perspective of the researchers/evaluators involved and is based on their critical reflections on the planning, processes used and outcomes attained. Insights were also gathered from those commissioning or using the findings given the utilization focus. Thus it documents the key “learnings” gained in planning, executing, reporting and utilising these evaluations rather than the findings themselves. As such it is grounded in notions of metaevaluation of use: to be accountable, to learn and to improve (Patton 2012). It also recognises the inherently political nature of the evaluation process.

### **Reflections and learnings**

Amongst other things any evaluation process should involve attention to stakeholders, negotiated purposes, relevant information, meaningful processes and products, timely and appropriate communication and reporting and concern for the consequences and influence of the evaluation process. Most important is to ascertain how the evaluation and its findings are actually to be used. The lessons learnt in reflecting on our processes and products and in asking those who commissioned and used the evaluation are grouped around five major foci:

- The significance of the evaluations: in short, are they important enough to justify the time and resources committed to them?
- Institutional climate, organisational change and politics, and their effects on the evaluations
- Evaluation approach and methodology and their effects on the evaluations
- The outcomes and utility of the evaluations
- Effective planning of the evaluations themselves.

Each of these will now be discussed in turn.

### *The significance of the evaluations*

It is clear that the more significant and important a program, practice or change is to an institution, the more important it is that its processes and outcomes are evaluated. In the case of the TradeApps evaluation, it was commissioned by senior staff in the relevant faculty to obtain independent evidence to confirm impressions they had of the “state of play” and extent of implementation, that is: the extent to which the rhetoric and vision of TradeApps was matched by the reality of practice on the ground. Information was therefore gathered from a variety of perspectives, including those of staff, students and industry. The findings confirmed what they knew: the rhetoric of TradeApps had been adopted to varying degrees by staff, and the reality of implementation fell short in most cases. But perhaps most importantly, the evaluation was commissioned to send a message to faculty staff, and that message was that this was a change in practice which had to be seen through and that its success was vital. Calling in evaluators from outside the faculty but from within the university to look at what was going on was designed to show staff that the faculty’s senior management regarded the successful implementation of TradeApps as a high and on-going priority. Because the evaluation was conducted relatively early in the implementation process, its focus was internal and formative. It was designed to document areas of practice,

and issues, that needed attention and improvement and to propose, where possible, how this might occur. If anything, it ranged too widely.

The university's Youth Strategy acknowledges the importance of retention to year 12 and opening doors to vocational pathways, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. These cohorts are significant in Victoria University's catchment and are seen as a key part of the university's social responsibility and role in providing educational and training opportunities for youth in western Melbourne. The evaluation was built around an evaluative framework which identified the key success factors of such programs (Clayton et al. 2010, p. 13) and focused on measuring the impact of the strategy on student satisfaction and teacher understanding of youth engagement practice. The data collected through the evaluation process has been used to inform annual improvements to the program. Again, the evaluation was an important one because the quality of both the teaching and learning and pastoral and other support are critical to student success. The evaluation provided both staff and student perspectives on the program's key features and enabled areas of success and aspects of the program that were still an issue to be identified. Thus, the information collected was intended to be valuable not only to the Youth Strategy team and those with whom they work, but also senior management within the university to help them assess what the strategy was, in fact, achieving.

The trade experience pilot is a key initiative of the Victorian government's Higher Education and Skills Group (HESG) to develop new approaches to pre-apprenticeship training. This pilot program is targeted at early school leavers and aims to enhance their skills by better linking school and VET learning experiences. The initiative attracted strong support from the Victorian minister, who is interested in attracting higher quality students to the trades. Thus, while the evaluation was again formative in its focus, it also met the external need to evaluate the outcomes of the pilot as one of the deliverables for the funding support provided by Skills Victoria. The evaluation was focused on providing feedback to advise both practices at VU and at other providers that will implement the program more extensively in 2013.

In summary, were these evaluations worth doing, and were they important to the organisation? The short answer is yes: each was concerned with a different, but pivotal, initiative for the university. This gives rise to the first learning from the process:

Learning 1: Evaluations need to be strategic and significant in order to make the best possible use of the institution's limited internal research and evaluation capacity, and any available budget, time and other resources.

#### *Institutional climate, change and politics*

Some of the critical aspects that can make or break an evaluation are the extent to which the evaluators are attuned to the climate of the organisation and, more specifically, the change approaches being adopted, the perceived extent of the change and the ways in which change is being received within the organisation. It is also critical to understand the prevailing organisational politics and the quality of working relationships within and between business units. The general morale in the organisation also impacts on the willingness of staff to participate in evaluation activities.

Last year, 2012, was a challenging year for Victoria University, as it was for many institutions in Victoria's vocational education sector. The university began a fundamental restructure (Victoria University 2012a). At the same time the Victorian State budget slashed VET funding, resulting in course closures and staff losses. The Youth Strategy was also affected because eligibility for the youth supplement was restricted to concession card holders. Previously all young people who left school early were eligible. This, in turn, affected both the viability of the program and the support services that could be funded and thus provided to this vulnerable group.

Staff morale in at least two of the three programs being evaluated have been impacted by the extent and size of the changes. Consequently, many staff were less willing to participate in any activities which were seen as over and above those associated with survival, or which have the potential to reflect adversely on personal or business unit performance.

In the climate in which all these evaluations took place it was clear that they were seen as something of an imposition. The underlying issue - or niggling doubt - is the extent to which we truly captured what was going on, even although we work within the broader organisation. For the TradeApps program this was particularly so as, in retrospect, we did not put in sufficient "hard yards" up front to understand the organisational dynamics at play across the faculty and what the key issues really were. This was indicated when we discovered relatively late in the process that a faculty-wide Community of Practice had been developed to help implement TradeApps. In all our interviews with staff at department level, there had been no hint of this significant and valuable activity. We stumbled on it somewhat at the last minute. This means spending more time with key staff at the beginning of the process, particularly line managers to assure "buy-in" to the evaluative process, to discuss purpose and assess the dynamic. The consequences of this leads to learnings 2 and 3.

Learning 2: Evaluators must immerse themselves in the prevailing climate and culture not only to understand what is going on, but also to take what actions are possible to ensure that the evaluation gathers the best possible information.

Learning 3: Evaluators must spend the time necessary to get "buy-in" from key individuals and groups.

In addition, in busy schedules it was hard to get groups of staff and students together for focus groups. While we worked with groups we could meet with readily and conveniently within the project timeframe (for example, interviewing the students from available classes), we were conscious that this was not an ideal process, nor did we get uniform staff and student coverage of the range of trade areas being examined. Simply, we took and worked with those whom we could access through the departmental heads. We also did not interview any sessional staff. In addition, more effort could have been put into obtaining and analysing course and other faculty documentation to look at the extent to which these reflected the spirit of the TradeApps approach. Interestingly this documentation, even when requested, was quite difficult to obtain.

Learning 4: Evaluators must get "buy-in" at a wide range of levels to unlock more and better sources of information.

One issue which struck us about both the staff and student focus groups draws on Goffman's "dramaturgical approach" (see Barnhart 1994) which uses a theatrical metaphor to explain the social interactions occurring between actors and their audience. Simply, it is a process of impression management where the "front stage" performance by a teaching team or a group of students for the evaluators might well contrast with their "back stage" performance which more nearly reflects their real views or activities. When they are outside or off-stage, and in a one-on-one situation, more of their backstage and real views and activities might be revealed. We asked ourselves about the extent to which their real views and approaches to TradeApps were tapped into through our evaluation's processes or whether the focus groups involved a conformity of views through a need to stay within an agreed "script" and "role", or even whether a process of "mystification" was in play (and this is, of course, why we tried as much as possible to use mixed methods and multiple information sources to look for consistency).

Learning 5: Evaluators must validate the information gathered carefully using multiple sources to ensure veracity. Do not rely too much on one particular source of information.

#### *Evaluation approaches and methodologies*

For the Youth Strategy evaluation the process generally ran well in the first year (2011). However we were conscious of a number of limitations. These included using a survey approach which, while valuable for obtaining views on a range of the attributes of the strategy, led to uneven response rates across the various groups of teachers and students so that we were not entirely sure that the data obtained reflected the broad views held. It certainly did not enable us to identify whether there were different perceptions across program areas and between the views of students and staff involved in the one program area. This was something we sought to correct in 2012 with a more extensive process of 'buy-in' and follow up, and by using staff in the Youth Strategy's management team to help boost response rates. Nevertheless, and despite all the efforts, response rates fell and remained unevenly distributed in both the staff and student surveys. From the perspective of a number of staff personal issues probably took over in 2012, making them less likely to respond to any survey. We put this down to the worsened "atmospherics" within the institution. In addition the practical difficulties encountered when people work across different programs and areas may also have played a part and affected response rates and "buy-in". It also made it difficult to validate the information collected from a variety of sources and to examine conflicting views between different informant groups and any variability in the quality of practice across program areas. Simply, the amount and quality of information was not up to it.

One approach would have been to run a series of focus groups to add value to the survey data. Again, these groups potentially suffered from the limitations found in the TradeApps evaluation, but may have added a value to the student survey free responses which were quite circumspect and of relatively little value in most cases. Surveys do not reveal the richness, but they are useful for obtaining comparative data across years. This is what the surveys sought to do, but the compromised response rates rendered drawing conclusions about trends and differences dangerous.

Learning 6: Evaluators need to be aware of the limits of the evaluation methodologies and data sources used, and what can reasonably be concluded based on the quality of information collected.

Learning 7: Evaluators need to be sensitive to the organisational climate and context. It will affect the extent to which staff are willing to participate in the evaluation process.

### *Outcomes and use*

The forms of reporting, their appropriateness and timeliness are all critical to an evaluation's utility. In the TradeApps evaluation in particular more could have been done to keep those commissioning the report up to date with progress (it is not a good sign when those who have commissioned the work ring asking for progress reports). This required the evaluation team to be more switched on to the faculty's timelines and critical dates. This also includes the forms of reporting. We used interim and final summary reports together with periodic verbal briefings about progress. In retrospect, more use could have been made of faculty senior staff meetings to report preliminary and final findings and gain their feedback and insights, discuss options and potential ways forward. However, there was a "separatedness" of the evaluators from all but those few people in the faculty involved in its commissioning. Thus the evaluators were largely invisible from many of those who would consider and make use of the report, except when they were involved in interviews or focus groups.

On the other hand the findings of the 2011 Youth Strategy report were presented to staff involved at a workshop and they had the chance to react to and comment on what was found as well as consider how it would help them improve practice and address any of the issues the evaluation.

Each of these evaluation reports is being used in different ways. In addition, each of them had just been finalised at the time of writing, so other uses than those reported here may emerge with time. The TradeApps evaluation has been circulated to senior staff within the university. In addition, it has been used to justify, or help define, working structures in the emerging Trades College (for example, the new Apprenticeship Support Unit). It will also be used to guide the work of program areas as they continue to implement TradeApps. The Youth Strategy report has provided yearly statements of strategy's health and fitness. This has helped identify areas and aspects of the program that are working well, as well as those that need to be improved. In addition, the most recent report will be used to provide evidence of the program's success to the university's senior management. The evaluation of the pilot trade experience program has been used to guide improvements to VU's program as well as advise the new institutions rolling out the program in 2013. In addition, it fulfils the evaluation requirements attached to the funding received for the Victorian Government.

Getting the form and timing for the reports – and the reporting process right is critical in ensuring take up and use. This leads to the penultimate learning:

Learning 8: Evaluators must work closely with their client to ensure that the forms of reporting and their timeliness are fit for purpose.

### *Effective evaluation planning*

At the heart of any effective evaluation is sound planning. Brinkerhoff et al. (1983) draw particular attention to the planning stage in their design manual. This, they suggest, involves:

- Determining the clear purpose of the evaluation
- Identifying what is being evaluated, who it is being done for, why it is being done, when it should be done, what the key evaluation questions are and what (if any) constraints there are on the evaluation and its process
- Developing and refining the evaluation plan.

This involves planning:

- How information will be collected
- How it will be analysed
- How reporting will occur, and
- How the evaluation will be managed and resourced

The planning process provides the key underpinnings to an effective evaluation, and effective planning may be 'underdone' in institutional settings. It would be true to say that the quality of evaluation planning varied across the three evaluations described in this paper. Thus the final learning is:

Learning 9: Effective institutional evaluation requires careful initial planning. Such an approach to planning leads to a greater chance of undertaking an evaluation with credibility and the ability to effect real change.

### **Final conclusions**

While this paper is perhaps too critical of the evaluations undertaken they provide a reminder to new and old evaluators alike of the issues that need to be borne in mind when framing, undertaking and reporting such work. Notwithstanding this, it also demonstrates the value of having a research and evaluation capacity within an institution, particularly one that is independent. This enables the organisation to conduct evaluations without calling in outside, and often expensive, consultants. The advantage that such a resource brings to the organisation is not only its knowledge of the political dynamics of the organisation but also a more ready access to staff and student informants. However, such evaluations are still hard for large institutions such as TAFE's, which are geographically dispersed and where there are prevalent sub-cultures - often discipline based - which take some time to work out. Thus, even internal evaluators can be too removed, and overcoming this requires a physical presence and - most importantly - building the necessary relationships to ensure ready and complete access to the information and data needed.

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