

No Small Changing: VET Research Policy and Directions in Australia 1994-2005.

This paper explores some of the issues for the future of VET research in Australia from the perspective of the Australian Vocational Education Research Association (AVETRA). In developing a discussion on the nature of the future this paper has a retrospective quality in observing the shifts and changes in VET research in the period from the mid 1990s to 2005 and identifies several shifts and developments in VET research in Australia. The purpose of this paper is to document developments and highlight several shifts and trends and explore what might be future opportunities and threats for VET research.

The paper is also developed in part as a record of events and as a way of identifying AVETRA's role and part in the development of a national research and the role that a national professional association can occupy in the context of national policy developments. AVETRA is the peak national body in Australian Vocational Education Research. It has over 250 members from all states and territories who are researchers, research managers, users of research, policy makers and policy implementers in VET. AVETRA members and researchers are from the public sector, the private sector as well as TAFE, universities and many are also independent consultants. This diversity of members gives AVETRA a unique quality in spanning the sectoral boundaries of VET, higher education and to a lesser extent schools.

AVETRA is an incorporated Association registered in NSW with a secretariat also based in NSW. AVETRA emerged from the Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council (ANTARAC) founded in 1994 as a sub-committee of the ANTA National Board. ANTARAC was responsible for national strategic directions in VET Research. AVETRA was founded with an initial \$10,000 grant from ANTARAC in 1997 and since then has been an independent organization for VET researchers. Almost ten years on AVETRA remains a viable and growing research association with a portfolio of activities including an annual conference, circulation of a monthly electronic AVETRA newsletter to members, the publication of the *International Journal of Training Research* as well as a range of other occasional services such as the OctoberVET professional development events conducted in various states.

AVETRA was a metaphoric "child" of the national reform agenda of VET and its growth from a fledgling organisation paralleled many of the developments in VET research as priorities shifted and the nature and character of VET research changed

As AVETRA prepares to celebrate its tenth anniversary and looks back and reflects on what has happened since its establishment there are continuities and discontinuities that span these points in time. There is still a highly interventionist Liberal federal government with a significant interest in steering VET to meet industry needs. In contrast to the earlier period of the national training reform agenda in the late 1980s the latest wave of reform of VET in 2005 is not a response to adverse economic and external economic conditions. At the time of writing the latest round of reforms in

2005/06 are influenced by low unemployment, demand for Australian commodities and high growth on the back of good regional economic conditions. The concerns with the performance of the VET system are almost exclusively summed up with the umbrella terms of “skills shortages”. It is also after period of consolidated planning and development by the Australian government in planning VET research that started from the period of the National Training Reform Agenda in the early 1990s.

Big Changes with No Small Change.

The Australian VET system is regarded by many other systems as having a well co-ordinated and systematic research culture and community. This principally emerged through two avenues. The first was a report commissioned by the Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee to assist the development of a national research strategy. The research team from the University of Technology comprised of Rod Mc Donald, Geoff Hayton Andrew Gonzci and Paul Hager and is probably better known by the short title of *No Small Change*. The project reported in 1993 and identified that the total research funds allocated to vocational education amounted to less than 0.2% to total expenditure in the VET sector.

The report authors argued that existing research was fragmented and little fundamental issues based research was carried out. The report argued for a national research and development strategy with a three-year cycle and government funding of a round of open grants allocated on the basis of open tender. It also said that although the transfer of research to policy is not often predictable that it was clear that existing research was under utilized in policy formation. The report also recommended a more co-ordinated and “hardnosed” approach to VET research with a view to developing a critical mass of researchers and capable of producing high quality research to inform policy. In fostering a collaborative culture *No Small Change* emphasized a co-ordinated and national approach and *No Small Change* also identified a series of priorities including workplace research, research on the assumptions underlying competency-based training and approaches to disseminating research.

As part of this an expanded role for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) was recommended as well as an elevating of VET research expenditure to 0.5%. In summary this report established a foundation for VET research that was consistent with the intentions of the National Training Reform Agenda. Strong links with industry and government with a policy related focus and an emphasis on collaborative networks to develop “hard nosed” research was consistent with the functional orientation of the reform process promoted by the federal labor government at the time.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research NCVER

The second avenue of change was the National Centre for Vocational Education Research that was established as a registered company with shareholders being the federal government and the state governments in 1992. It was originally established as the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development in 1980 from the recommendation in the Kangan report for an Australian Technology Centre as a clearinghouse for research. The functions were broadened as a consequence of the Williams Report and finally in 1992 the name was changed to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research NCVER. The NCVER has had three Executive Directors

Dr Bill Hall, Mr Chris Robinson and Dr Tom Karmel and it is located in Adelaide, South Australia. The NCVET's role grew with the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) in 1993 and the NCVET was given responsibility for the management of the national VET statistical system and the reporting to the federal government on VET activity and participation. Other operations included the publication of the *Australia and New Zealand Journal of TAFE Research*¹, the provision of a clearinghouse function, the production of statistical and research reports and research conferences for the dissemination of VET research conducted by NCVET projects and commissioned projects. The NCVET also occupied an important role in developing what *No Small Change* referred to as a critical mass of researchers through developments such as the "no frills" NCVET research conference.

The NCVET was to develop an ancillary role to the developing Australian National Training Authority and its subcommittee ANTARAC. This included providing consolidated national statistics for ANTA and administering the National Research and Evaluation Committee (NREC) and the emerging national key centres program. Added complexities in developing a coherent response to VET research was complicated by the fact that the federal Department of Education and Training² retained a research and evaluation capacity and also subcontracted research and quasi-research functions to ANTA such as the National Adult Literacy Research Grants. The dispersed nature of the agencies with ANTA in Brisbane, the federal department in Canberra and NCVET in Adelaide presented challenges in enabling a co-ordinated and timely approach.

The response to *No Small Change* was the development of three-tiered approach to capacity building VET research. The first tier was NCVET's in-house capacity involving the emerging national statistic collection that became Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (VETMISS) as well as several major priority projects such as indigenous training. These roles were embedded in successive National Strategies for Vocational Education and Training.

The second tier consisted of several national key VET research centres with specific purposes. Most of the locations with centre status were in the higher education institutes and in the early allocations of centre funding included The Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) at Monash University and the Research Centre in Vocational Education and Training (RCVET). There was also a second level of centre funding which included programs such as Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) at RMIT and Melbourne University and the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (CRLRA) at the University of Tasmania and the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Canberra. These centres were provided with funding for three years with the objective of conducting research in specific areas and developing strategies of dissemination.

¹ This journal became the *International Journal for Training Research* and is produced by AVETRA and has two issues per annum.

² The federal Department underwent several name changes including The Department of Education, Employment and Training, Department Education Training (DEET) and Youth Affairs (DEYA) and is currently known as the Department of Education Science and Training with a separate junior Ministry for Vocational Educational Training that emerged from the Labor (1993-96) ministry of Vocational Education and Schools.

Accompanying the development of research centres in universities senior research appointments including the appointment of Professor Leo Maglen³ as a research professor in VET facilitated a boost in the esteem of the area as a distinct discipline with a research base. He joined Prof John Stevenson as one of the few Professors in vocational education in Australian higher education at the time.

The final tier was an annual round of NREC grants in designated priority areas that are focused on the National Strategy for VET as well as an open category. The value of these annual grants totals approximately \$2m and were evaluated and administered by NCVET. The annual round of tenders attracted teams and individual researchers from TAFE, universities, private research consultants as well as some VET providers (Gibb 2000). In the initial phases of the NCVET and NREC research strategy there was a heavy emphasis on developing a comprehensive stocktaking through a series of literature reviews. This was replaced by an emphasis on projects. This initial strategy has been subject to considerable change from 2003 and will be discussed later in this paper.

Debates on Quality, Utility and Opportunity.

In general this strategy developed a critical mass of a research and researchers and developed a momentum that led to general sense that the quality, level and sophistication of research had grown considerably (Anderson, Hanley and Whittingham 1995). There was also strong commitment of researchers to the notion of VET research and VET constituency. Executive Director of NCVET Chris Robinson summarized developments at the first AVETRA conference as.

The striking thing about the research reviews examined ...is the sheer volume of VET research that has been carried out in Australia over the 1990s, particularly over the past two years... Quantity in VET research is not an issue. The next challenge is quality
(Robinson 1998 p 22)

In the first AVETRA conference this emerged as a major controversy with notions of "quality research" advanced by some senior higher education being strongly criticized by TAFE and VET members. The expectation that quality would be determined on a criteria that reflected university research values was challenged by VET researchers seeking to respond to a broader audience and wanted to use indicators of quality associated with utility and the application of research into policy.

The 1999 AVETRA conference attempted to address these issues under the conference theme of Quality and Diversity but questions about quality and appropriateness have been enduring questions for the emerging VET community. ANTA research manager Kareena Arthy's address VET to the AVETRA conferences in 2004 criticized the quality of VET research. The principle concerns were a lack of utility of the research for policy makers suggesting there was a gap between the expectations of the instruments of government commissioning research and those conducting research. In an address to the first AVETRA conference participants, the former Chair of ANTARAC Gregor Ramsey expressed the need for researchers to be more concerned about demand side of research rather than a pre-occupation with the supply side (Ramsey 1998). This question about utility and application was taken up by Chris and Joy Selby-

³ Leo Maglen was also the first president of AVETRA from 1996-1999

Smith who suggested that the link between research and policy is not uncomplicated lineal one and argued that the research enterprise is accumulative where a body of knowledge, rather than individual projects, can contribute to a policy direction. Selby Smith et al argued that the potential use of research is dependent on the bureaucratic setting and the uptake of research is *enhanced* by the actions of stakeholders. This means according to Selby Smith et al that the,

Decision makers have an obligation to be engaged in with the world of ideas and to think and participate in intellectual debate. They cannot expect to make good decisions without thought. They cannot expect to make good decisions without thought. They have the responsibility as professionals to develop their own human capital (Selby Smith et al 1998).

The Selby Smith et al paper highlighted the importance of a two-way flow of information and the importance of a research network and proposed that a greater importance had been placed on dissemination and that this needed to be complimented with an emphasis on linkages. Rod McDonald one of the authors of *No Small Change* also engaged in this debate and stated that

There is no way in which anyone can prove connections between the bulk of research and the its potential impact; in fact during the impact of Research project the four of use came across a number of examples where research it would be impossible to ever know the impact, some research had been used to justify decisions already made rather than inform them, some research had been resulted in policy change in direct contravention of the findings, and some had little use or influence (McDonald et al 1998 p42)

McDonald also highlighted the fact that decision making settings are complex, complicated, dynamic and contested and argued that influence is often dependent on agendas and perceptions and that some decision makers are simply unaware of the research. The ability to influence decisions and apply research is dependent on the nature of organizations and whether key staff are update date with relevant research and have contact with the research community. In an environment typified by perpetual restructures, dynamic change and increasing subcontracting as well as the shifts in the training portfolio across education and training departments the connections and networks needed for the transfer of research to policy have been increasingly difficult to sustain.

This environment suggests that Australian VET researchers would have to undertake a brokerage role. This suggested that the job of research and the job of dissemination was not separate from research itself and that VET research would have a stronger link with practitioners and stakeholders than other forms of education research. This brokerage role is crucial because, with few exceptions, TAFE has not been funded to develop a research role and that meant that higher education research would need to develop strong relationships with the VET sector.

Other concerns contradicted the claims about the weakness in connections between research and policy makers. Anxieties emerged that research being too closely aligned to the interests of government and not other stakeholders in the VET system at the expense of a more diverse and inclusive approach to research. The nature of the Australian VET system developed in the 1980s and the management of VET research

contributed to this perception. With the establishment of ANTA in 1993 VET research priorities emerged from the development the triennial ANTA National VET strategic plans that were developed through consultation with stakeholders such as industry and government. During the period of ANTA steering the research programs the priorities associated with developing an open training system comprising of public and private providers tended concentrate on issues such as user choice, implementation of training packages and qualifications framework. All these initiatives tended to favor and instrumental and industry based approach that tended to sub-ordinate One example is the failure of ANTA, until late in its 11 year existence to recognize and respond to the urgent need to research the TAFE teacher workforce and capacity building what is now referred to as the VET professional.

More importantly the functional nature and character of VET research and its systems based nature tended prevent the development of socially critical perspectives of VET. This failure was taken up by John Stevenson who summarized this issue in positioning VET exclusively with “industry needs” by citing English VET researcher Dennis Gleeson.

A central problem lies in the dominance of a master discourse that suppresses diversity and pluralism, including alternative views of knowledge, learning and citizenship. (Gleeson in Stevenson 1998 p50)

The development of a socially critical perspective of VET and VET research was made difficult by the absence of a robust critique of VET. While the authors of *No Small Change* had identified the need for a robust critique and varied methodologies to sustain such a research methodology there was a reluctance to break out of the evaluative tradition (Kell 2001). System managers such as Gregor Ramsey also pleaded “to get the art of constructive criticism going” and to have “free and open debate based on hard evidence” (Anderson et al 1995). Despite this pleading researcher have been unwilling to risk getting “off side” with the VET establishment and many researchers have confided that they were worried about being “blacklisted”. This concern over a level of “political correctness” in VET and VET research has been hard to establish but the competitive nature of the research environment, the strong links of between VET research and VET system planning and performance as well as the overtly political nature of VET research suggests conspiracy theories and anxieties by researchers will exist and in some cases may have some justification.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of developing a critical mass of VET researchers was the need to provide opportunities for researchers in terms of training as well as opportunities to participate in research. One avenue that emerged in the late 1990s was the Framing the Future (1995-1998) and Re-Framing the future initiatives. These programs had the objective of being professional development to assist VET staff implement enterprise level training. These initiatives required joint funding from training providers but had the effect of developing a range of what might be described as “grounded” research projects with a strong commitment to action research and research grounded in teaching and learning practice. In the absence of funding TAFE for the purpose of research these initiatives occupied an important, but often unrecognized role in enabling TAFE and VET staff opportunities to establish research careers. Project funding between \$10,000 and \$25,000 is allocated to approximately 200 projects per year including the application of research. This role in generating practitioner based VET

research can also be applied to the ANTA Learnscope and Australia Flexible Learning Framework projects.

Consolidation, Change and Fragmentation?

The climate in which the Australian VET research agenda was developed featured significant squeeze on public resources and VET as a relatively new arrival on the research and development scene progress was steady but characterized by strong level of monitoring and auditing which typified public sector management in this era. The environment in which VET research developed was typified by reduction in investment in real terms in research and development in Australia so the sector seems to have benefited in contrast to other areas of research in having an identified national strategy (Kell 2000). The development of research of research centres enabled consolidation in the university sector and an established cycle of research events enabled the development of a critical mass. As a professional association AVETRA maintained a role in developing a critical mass of VET researchers across the sectors as well as in the private and public sector organizations. Research Centres however expressed a level of frustration over the reporting processes and bureaucratic requirements of publicly funded research (McIntyre 2001). Additional difficulties arose from the highly competitive nature of the funding process and the limitations on funding.

By 2000 NREC grants attracted 185 applications with an 18% success rate. The majority of successful submissions were university-based submissions with consultants having a success rate of 15% (Gibb 2000; Kell 2001). The 2000 allocation of research funding also indicated that 70% of funds went to priority areas with 24% to open category and 6% to consolidation studies or short studies in identified gaps (Gibb 2000) Overall the unsuccessful rate at that time was 82%. The split of successful grant recipients tended to favor universities with 60% and private consultants with 32% and TAFE staff being successful in 5%. The distributions tended to support critics who suggested TAFE was a minor partner in the training reform agenda in the late 1990s. However in some cases TAFE Institutes entered partnerships with higher education institutions and one highly successful TAFE research institute is the Centre for Undertaking Research in Vocational Education (CURVE) at the Canberra Institute of Technology which has strong track record in attracting and completing NREC grants and projects.⁴

Additional criticisms emerged concerning the instrumental and evaluative nature of the research undertaken and the need to develop a more diversified approach methodologically as well as in topics and programs (Kell 2001). In 2000 John Stevenson wrote in a summary of papers in the then *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research* and commented on the strong emphasis on advancing the nature of knowledge and curriculum but noted that the orientation of much of the research is strongly influenced by an instrumental policy focus.

It reinforces the need to redress the top down technological driven short term focus of vocational curriculum, re elevate the needs of learners, redress the problems in vocational knowledge development and assessment and overcome the stresses in the vocational education system caused by the nature and implementation

⁴ CURVE was directed by Ms Berwyn Clayton the president of AVETRA from 1999-2004

strategies of the corporatist reform movement, this work is important for both practice and for informing policy (Stevenson 2000 p122).

In international terms Australian outlays in VET research were seen to be small relative to other countries, particularly the European Union where VET research centres such as European Centre for Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) was funded through multinational sources of member states under the umbrella of Leonardo or Socrates Programs. Nevertheless, the NCVET in its National Research and Evaluation Strategy was confident enough to claim that Australia was a world leader in developing a systematic approach to VET research. Its 2001-03 strategy document said

Australian VET research has adopted a much more focused strategic approach than many...overseas examples. Although we face similar problems in vocational education, no other country has developed a coherent national strategy for VET research and evaluation. In many other countries, effective dissemination strategies are often lacking. In many ways, Australia leads the world (NCVER 2001)

The consolidation phase of VET research arguably ended with the conclusion of the NCVET Strategic in 2004 and the review of the NREC program in 2004. The circumstances associated with nature of vocational education had changed since the formulation of *No Small Change* in 1993 when Australia was in recession, In contrast the economy in 2003/4 had been characterized by significant growth rates and low unemployment and the priority had shifted from combating unemployment to responding to widespread skill shortages.

The structures associated with the VET research, most notably the national VET key research centres, came under significant scrutiny, as did some of the structural arrangements that had typified the VET research strategy in Australia since 1993. These changes emerged from the review of NREC conducted by Phillips Curran of KPA consultants. The review identified the importance of the key centre strategy in developing VET research but also suggested several drawback were apparent saying

The most significant weakness of the current model identified through the consultations rests with its apparent inability to optimize genuine and systematic capacity building in VET (Curran Phillips 2004 p4).

In addition the consultant identified a leadership vacuum emerging from the VET research and VET community and said:

At the broadest level it was suggested that ANTA's overall goals and role in relation to VET research lack clarity. This translated into general commentary about an absence of leadership by ANTA in VET research. From within the line areas there was a perception of limited or no real engagement with the process of developing long-term research priorities and limited awareness of the research output (Phillips Curran 2004 p13)

The review process revived some of the earliest themes about the diversity of perceptions around quality, utility and the purpose of VET research. Frustrations over timelines and the ability of centres and projects to deliver on time spilled into this review.

One of the weaknesses of the review was a failure to appreciate the environment in which the centres, all in the university sector, operated in. Characteristically most higher education institutes operated in an environment of multiple accountabilities and priorities with limited resources and were hampered by competing priorities. Unfortunately the centres, all active and productive, were doomed by both their location but also the shifting priorities of yet another round of reforms in VET. The review also failed to appreciate the role the centre strategy had in capacity building VET research in Australia and the difficulty in establishing networks and links with industry and other academies in an environment characterized by competition and fragmentation.

The consultant proposed there was a need for the development of dynamic research organisations, long-term research agendas, strong partnerships and engagement with researchers, policy makers and practitioners. The review identified weaknesses in the design of the model and also the management of the program by ANTA.

The Phillips Curran (2004) review proposed three alternatives. An enhanced status quo model, one or two networked centres, programs of research with no centres, a partnership with Australian Research Council (ARC) in a centre for excellence for VET research and finally a style model. The impetus for change experienced delay, and some frustration on the part of stakeholders, with the result that 2005 NREC grants were rolled over with delays to decisions on centre options. In the long run the existing key centres were not refunded and the second option was recommended with the development of two networked consortia with specific focus. The first was a consortia focused on "Tailoring VET Providers in Capacity Building for the Future Skills" based at the National Institute of Labor Studies Flinders University (NILS) in partnership with the Post Compulsory Education and Life Long Learning Centre at Melbourne University and the second is a cross sector consortia entitled "Supporting VET providers in Capacity Building for the Future" based at University of South Australia, University of Technology Sydney and the Canberra Institute of Technology. The first consortia has yet to make an impact on capacity building in the VET sector whereas the second consortia with some experienced and established researchers in the VET sector has made good progress in a difficult and sensitive area and has been active in participating in AVETRA events.

In 2005 the federal government announced that ANTA would be abolished in July 2005 and that a new vocational education system would be developed under the broad banner of *Skilling Australia*. The discussion paper announced an agenda for change that would be industry led and the reform of the VET system to respond to skills shortages. The new reforms foreshadowed an integration of the functions of ANTA into the federal Department of Science, Education and Training and a level of support to the 23 Australian Technical Colleges announced during the 2004 federal election. The *Skilling Australia* discussion documents also canvassed opinions on the management of the VET research services and contracts. While the outcomes of the *Skilling Australia* process supported the retention of the contracts with the NCVER, the Minister for vocational education announced a review of the NCVER contracts in December 2005 that has maintained a level of uncertainty around the future funding and administration of VET research.

Conclusion.

Initiatives in VET research have emerged from strong state intervention that steered VET reforms generally. VET research emerged as an adjunct of these reforms and occupied an important role in the processes of change and reforms in Australian VET. In the early 1990s VET research was identified as being fragmented and lacking appropriate resourcing and required a strategic plan to develop a critical mass of researchers and VET research. The Australian VET sector reform was characterized by strong government intervention and planning to develop and facilitate a diverse mix of public and private providers but in contradiction to this reform mantra growth and consolidation of VET research featured strong links to national strategic planning, a national plan for resourcing research and a national research institute (NCVER) as a focus for managing the research development. Although tensions and contradictions emerged between NCVER, ANTA, the federal department and state governments, which included periodic stalemates over funding and direction, significant progress has been made.

The initial phase of developing Australian VET research was reliant on 4 national key centres and programs funded at approximately \$250,000 per annum for a period of three years as well as an annual round of open grants valued at approximately \$2m. This as well as the resources and budget of NCVER are the mainstay of VET research in Australia. Despite almost ten years since *No Small Change* this remains a frugal outlay in international terms. The strong interventionist and sponsoring role of government has developed an orientation that favors an evaluative approach to research and this has tended to frustrate and confine more diverse methodologies and failed to inform the VET reform agenda beyond a reductionist redistributive role in meeting a social goals for VET. Largely the research has not questioned the status quo around capitalism work, and training and has failed to develop a socially critical view of VET and VET research described by John Stevenson and others.

The close links with government strategic planning has also created continuing tensions around questions about the utility of research to informing decision making and policy making. The arguments around utility have been directed around issues and perceptions of quality and these have tended to be directed at the VET research community as criticisms of competence. These arguments around utility and quality have tended to neglect the contextual factors and contingencies that determine if research will be utilized by policy makers. Many commentators have identified the need for a professional and informed bureaucracy in VET matters as this one feature of a dynamic and changing environment in VET that has mitigated against an uptake of research. Rapid change comprising of rapid restructures and subcontracting of services has eroded a corporate memory that facilitate a co-ordinated and systematic response to the unfinished business of capacity building. The pre-occupation with debates about quality and utility have distracted discussions on continuing a capacity building process to consolidate a VET research community with a critical mass. This absence has prompted AVETRA to develop a capacity building statements *VET Research Towards 2014* and activities such as OctoberVET seminars in state capitals involving members. These initiatives are designed to highlight to opportunities for training, mentoring and professional development for VET practitioners as the future for VET moves into another era of potential uncertainty. AVETRA recognizes that it has an important role in developing cohesion and coherence in a sector where there is potential for fragmentation and wasteful competition and continues to occupy a sector wide role.

Australian VET research has been able to develop coherent and recognizable VET research community. The volume and breadth of work has been reflected in the continued viability of AVETRA as an association, its conferences and as well as other conferences hosted in Queensland, Western Australian and NSW each year. There is a growing and formidable collection of VET research which is well represented on the NCVER website as well as across the university and TAFE systems. These developments began in earnest with *No Small Change*. However the *Skilling Australia* agenda in the post ANTA era presents a new set of challenges to maintain the momentum and achievements of Australian VET research that started with the *No Small Change* report.

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