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**‘Global VET: Challenges at Global, National and Local ?????’**

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### **Capability development for the knowledge era: reculturing and life based learning**

#### **Abstract (No. 0007)**

More so than ever before, business viability depends on the human factor – on the capability of it’s workforce and the ability to transfer and share knowledge. Business in the vocational training and technical (VTE) sector requires dynamic and adaptable learning systems and the capacity to support learners designing their own learning. Learning through *who* and *how* you know is becoming as important as *what* you know. Learners in VET need to engage in a wide range of learning other than professional learning. Much of this ‘life-based learning’ deeply influences our thinking and our work practices. A key challenge is how to recognise, value and support learning that extends beyond the work environment yet is inextricably connected with and influences that environment.

An ecological metaphor provides a framework for this. It allows us to create a range of adaptive learning models. It provides a suite of capabilities and draws on plurality and richness of ideas. The ecological metaphor also recognises that there are multiple ways to adapt to and shape the environment in which we live, work and learn. The message is that there is no one-way or no best model for working and learning in the knowledge era. We are challenged to think beyond the familiar and to

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recognise, value and celebrate 'humanness' while investing in the characteristics that define a learning and working ecology.

Professional learning for the knowledge era will be characterised by variety, inclusiveness, interrelatedness, acknowledging the importance of relationships, the capability to adapt and influence and a shared responsibility for ensuring the 'fitness' of the environment in which we work and learn. The focus is on learning models for the future and the research findings of a group of people who are passionate about exploring how we will work and learn in the knowledge era.

## **Introduction**

It is widely recognized that there is a need to re-examine how we will work and learn in vocational training and technical (VTE) in the knowledge era. The environment in which we work and learn is dynamic and constantly shifting and the impact occurs at all levels - national, state and local including the point of delivery and individual level. As structures, policies and everyday work practices change, the VTE workforce vies to keep current in frequently turbulent times. Jobs are regularly redefined, restructured or lost, requiring a re-examination by people of their priorities, goals, outcomes and positioning within organisations.

This occurs within the larger context of global shifts from which we are not immune. We are part of a new era - the knowledge era. This is an 'organic' era of openness, chaos, responsiveness and creativity as distinct from the industrial, mechanistic era

of command, control, predictability and efficiency. Every industry is facing these changes and VET is no exception. The challenge is to not destroy the old, but to build on and transcend its strengths with new models, thinking, approaches and strategies that will work more effectively in the knowledge era.

As we move through these transition phases from one era to the next VTE faces many challenges and issues, including:

- the changing nature and needs of the VET workforce
- the need for capacity building approaches rather than compliance approaches in the training package environment
- new pedagogical approaches to learning and teaching and innovation in VET
- strategies that will break down many of the barriers that learners face
- integration of working and learning in VET
- honouring the legacy and retaining what works as we continue to learn and change – combining the two gives us a unique potential.

### **The research project**

The TAFE NSW International Centre for Teaching and Learning (ICVET) established a partnership with the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and subsequently the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) to research the design for professional development in the knowledge era.

The researchers are from TAFE NSW ICVET and the research team is informed and advised by a Working Group of national and international learning and knowledge management experts and a National Reference Group that comprises representatives from states and territories. The National Reference Group is chaired by the Institute Director – TAFE NSW Illawarra Institute.

The aim of the research project, which is known as “*Designing Professional Development for the Knowledge Era*”, is to develop a business framework for professional development in the knowledge era that supports workforce planning and organisational development in the knowledge era. The vision is for learners taking responsibility for their own development in complex and changing contexts and for organisations to support that development through the creation of rich learning environments. To do this effectively, strategy, theory, people and practice needs to be brought together in new and creative ways, so that organisations in the vocational training and technical (VTE) sector remain strategically positioned in the knowledge era.

This research project builds on the outcomes of a previous related research project “*Working and Learning in Vocational Education and Training in the Knowledge Era*” ( <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/projects/resources/pdfuturesummary.pdf> ), which was managed by TAFE NSW ICVET and funded by ANTA. A key output of that research was the identification of eight enablers to support new knowledge being generated within organisations. The enablers are:

1. Socio-technical systems - integrate information and communication
2. Networks and relationships - foster greater understanding of the organisation from within
3. Organisational identity - connect staff to the organisation's fundamental identity
4. Work outcomes and career paths - connect to the work and career trajectories of workers
5. Emergent professional development - establish structures that integrate the use of professional development resources with knowledge work
6. Worker as designer - provide workers with the autonomy to design their own professional development activities
7. Working and learning as an iterative process - build professional development into the iterative nature of knowledge work
8. Organisational environment - create organisational contexts that value intuitive thinking and working

The research highlighted the need to re-examine creatively the design and approaches to professional development, that would integrate the enablers into organisations. The current research project “*Designing Professional Development for the Knowledge Era*” examines these issues and identifies emerging models and strategies that will do this. As a major national research project, it is identified in the national Training Package Workplan as a key strategy for the vocational and technical sector. Specifically, it is referred to in Outcome 10 as Action 3:

Outcome 10: Strategies have been developed to strengthen teaching, learning and assessment

Action 3: Development of new models of professional development to support practitioners in the Knowledge Era – in partnership with NSW.

The project commenced in April 2005 and will be completed in March 2006. The outcome will be the identification of generic capabilities, new models and strategies for professional development within a business framework, evaluation approaches and guiding principles. A series of case studies will be included. The target audience is management to support them in establishing new processes and approaches to learning and development, and also individuals, to provide them with new and more varied strategies for their own learning. The outcomes of the research will be able to be customized for use in local contexts.

## **Methodology**

The research focuses on the lived experience, hopes and possibilities for the future. The research has been a qualitative process involving human inquiry, which provides opportunities for people to explore and making sense of their actions and experiences.

There was no set proposition. The research was based on the need to further explore the findings of the “Working and Learning in VET in the Knowledge Era” research project “ and to examine generic capabilities, new models and strategies for

professional development in the knowledge era within a business framework. In this sense, the findings emerged during the course of the research.

The methodological approach involved the:

- Collection, examination and analysis of the experience, understanding and learning of a number of individuals (over 100) within the Australian vocational training and technical (VTE) sector, through an appreciative inquiry approach
- Extensive literature searches and reviews
- Continual re-examination and critique of the data through extensive cycles of inquiry, with the subsequent development of new levels of understanding.
- Commissioning of a number of thought pieces to inform the research.
- Identification of, and write up a number of case studies that exemplified the findings of the research.

The methodology can best be described as:

A phenomenological approach:

The main focus is on the lived experience of many individuals who described and shared their stories, understanding, hopes and dreams. Data was collected, synthesized, analysed and emerging themes were identified.

Based on the notion of hermeneutics:

Through cycles of inquiry with different groups and individuals, the researchers sought to discover a way forward to a new approach to professional development.

New data and findings were regularly presented for critique to the Working Group, national Reference Group, national forums and workshops, and research associates. With each cycle, new understanding emerged, the findings expanded and explanations became more substantial.

Extensive and rigorous theoretical exploration: As well as the literature review, the researchers had access to a multiplicity of ideas and theories and multiple scholarly interpretations from members of their Working Group, research associates and those who wrote thought pieces for the project. A substantial and broad theoretical base was built through this process.

Technique was dialogue: Through critical conversations between different representatives of ideas and concepts, aimed at resolution. Representatives from all parts of the VTE sector were involved. The dialogue involved in-depth critique, examination from many perspectives and an iterative process.

Validity and reliability were maintained through the high level and quality of awareness, sensitivity and skills of the researchers and those they researched with. Systematic methods were applied to many aspects of the research, particularly the research forums. The research was not conducted alone, that is, the Working Group in particular contributed to the shaping of the research, the findings and the theoretical base that emerged. There were extensive feedback loops and research cycles in place.

There were two main phases to the research. *Phase one* focused on the development of the theoretical basis for professional development in the knowledge era, including concepts, models and strategies. *Phase 2* involved an Activation Strategy to disseminate the work in progress, to seek feedback from people in the field and to discuss practical application through a business framework.

Three action planning forums were held across Australia and the learning from the forums will be incorporated into the final research document. In the interim, papers

are being made available on the TAFE NSW ICVET website [www.icvet.edu.au](http://www.icvet.edu.au) (go to PD Models and Frameworks on the front page).

## The findings

The key concepts that have emerged from the literature review and that have been positively reinforced through the national forums and working groups, are:

- Knowledge era: the environment in which we work and learn and the need to shift from mechanistic and standardised, to more creative and intuitive ways of working and learning
- Learning ecologies: the metaphor that moves us from the networks metaphor to one that aligns us with our environments, relationships and consequences
- Knowledge work a key generic capability for the knowledge era that focuses on the sharing, interpreting and generating of knowledge
- Life based learning a holistic methodology that focuses on the 'knower' and learning experiences both inside and outside of work
- Strength based approach: the philosophy underlining our approach to learning and development in the knowledge era that shifts us from traditional deficit based approaches
- Principles: to guide our actions and strategies that can be applicable in most contexts
- Business wisdom: a way of being and one that extends us beyond organizational learning
- Sustainability and resilience: the desired outcome
- Evaluation: the need for continuous strength based approaches to evaluation
- Enablers the mechanism within organizations that support learning and development

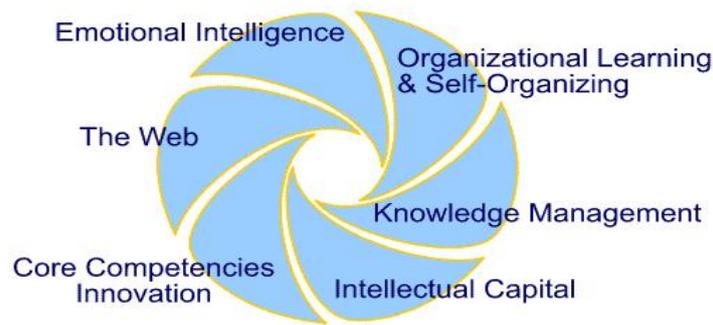
- Business framework: Ways of contextualising the model to suit local context and business needs

Note that the research at the time of preparing this paper is still a work in progress and much of the data is being analysed and incorporated into the research. The initial focus in the research has been on the concepts and theories and the researchers are currently examining the practical applications of the findings.

The following sections expand on some of the initial concepts identified through the literature research.

### Knowledge era and knowledge work

The context for the research project is the knowledge era which is characterised by complexity, rapid movement, turbulence, contradictions and multiple priorities. It is *also* characterised by a great amount of energy, excitement, opportunity and creativity. It is an 'intangible era' where the growing economic commodity is knowledge itself more so than goods and services. *Who* and *how* we know becomes more important than *what* we know. It is not just about accessing information but about how we learn to continually select, borrow, interpret, share, contextualise, generate and apply knowledge to our work. Relationships become as important as systems and processes. Some see the knowledge era as comprising a 'new vortex' of:



THE 'NEW VORTEX' OF THE KNOWLEDGE ERA<sup>1</sup>

We need contemporary and meaningful ways to make sense of how to best work, learn and live effectively in these complex, diverse, unpredictable, challenging, opportunistic and irritating times. The knowledge era is disrupting our thinking, our relationships and our work practices *and* we must adapt to it to survive.

### Learning ecologies

A new metaphor is emerging. It involves a shift from the 'networks' metaphor to a 'learning ecologies' metaphor. Learning ecologies is a useful symbol as it is familiar to us in terms of the importance of our relationship to the environment, the holistic view that it incorporates and the underlying interconnectedness of all living things. Yet it is complex enough to fit the uncertain, self organising and emergent nature of the knowledge era.

The learning ecologies metaphor links our lived experience and our humanness to our environment and work context. It focuses on our need to *continually adapt* and to

<sup>1</sup> Dr Charles M Savage of Knowledge Era Enterprises "Shaping Our Future" – Cable and Wireless Optus, Melbourne, October 1999

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be resilient to thrive in changing work contexts. It incorporates the need to constantly work with contradictions and paradoxes and to create space for:

- imagination and intuition *and* logic and reason
- a design mind set *and* a problem solving mind set
- conversations and face to face events *and* the virtual.

There is no one model or one solution for a way forward. Our current models and strategies for skills development and knowledge transference need to be expanded to incorporate life based approaches. Agility and a multiplicity of approaches are required. Key decisions need to be made about which systems and processes are best kept standardised and mechanised because our organisational wisdom tells us this is the most effective and efficient thing to do. And which systems and processes are best left 'open' so that people can apply their imagination, intuition and creativity.

### **Life based learning**

The models that we are most familiar with are the expert centred and work based learning models. The expert centred learning model focuses on the 'teacher' or holder of knowledge and the imposed and desired learning. The work based learning model focuses on the project and facilitator and processes such as action learning, where knowledge is constructed. Emergent in the knowledge era is the need for a model that is more closely aligned to the learning ecologies metaphor. Such a model is the 'life based learning' model which focuses on the 'knower', personal discovery

and the continual reshaping of knowledge. The theory and practice base for life based learning is currently being finalised by the researchers.



These models are inclusive and interrelated and not hierarchical. Life based learning allows for more of the ‘whole’ person to be present in their learning and at work. It adds to the possibilities for learning and development in VTE . Life based learning acknowledges that what we experience and learn outside of work can be as important to our work as what we experience and learn at work. It makes explicit that individuals have skills and capabilities that are not always visible or recognized by organisations. The participants in the national forums clearly identified with the impact of life based learning on their thoughts and actions at work. They also raised the importance of personal values and their profound effect on our work and culture.

Models are not always neatly applied in the workplace. The boundaries blur and at times learning can be a ‘messy’ and emergent process. No one model or approach is better than the other. The mix and match of strategies for skills development and knowledge transference relies on needs, context, resources, experience, personal preference, priorities and business requirements. Not only organisational learning but business wisdom becomes an imperative.

## **Business wisdom**

Business wisdom involves the breaking down of 'silos', increasing the integration and connections at work and the courage to do 'the right thing'. It is about the linkages and connections at work. It involves insight, compassion, humility, common sense and good judgement. It is difficult to act wisely in organisations particularly when it contradicts directives, requirements, plans, funding arrangements and established strategies. It is about moving what is good and right from rhetoric to practice and working with the contradictions and paradoxes. Business wisdom is about being open to the unexpected, supporting people in learning through their mistakes and valuing foundation age old virtues such as generosity, sensitivity, authenticity, integrity, trust and good will. Generosity and integrity are increasingly important virtues for the knowledge era. To achieve what we set out to achieve in organizations requires us to anticipate and preempt problems and capitalise on potential opportunities; mobilise and engage organisational members; evolve from a reactionary organism to a proactive one; and remain viable and sustainable while serving as stewards to our communities and the environment <sup>2</sup>.

Of importance is the mindfulness with which we conduct ourselves as people, at work. As a community of individuals at work, regardless of what we do, it's about how we relate to each other. We always have opportunities to reshape our choices.

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<sup>2</sup> Hays Martin. J, "Dynamics of Organisational Wisdom" Australian National University.

A theme emerging from the national forums is that capability is the *result* of how we work, relate and focus on our development and not vice versa.

### **Asset or strength based models**

A major shift in our mind set needs to take place – from deficit based models and approaches to positive or strength based models and approaches. Deficit models focus on what is wrong, what is missing and how to fill the gap. Most of our planning approaches are based on these models which are a legacy of the industrial era. They are currently the dominant model for learning and development. Strength based models are more holistic and focus on what's right and working well and amplifying this.

### **Capability development strategies**

There are a number of learning and development strategies that best fit within a strength based model. Strategies such as learning conversations, appreciative inquiry, talent management, disruptive technology and positive deviance do this. These strategies and what it means are examined in detail in the research project.

### Many models and many strategies

**foundation age-old virtues and truth**  
such as generosity, sensitivity, authenticity, integrity, trust and goodwill

**established professional development practices**  
such as work based learning, action learning, mentoring, coaching, communities of practice

**emerging strategies** such as learning conversations, appreciative inquiry, talent management, disruptive technology and positive deviance

To focus on one of these strategies - appreciative inquiry, as a key developmental strategy for the future. Appreciative inquiry (AI) is based on the premise that 'organisations change in the direction in which they inquire.' So an organisation which inquires into problems will keep finding problems, but an organisation which attempts to appreciate what is best in itself will discover more and more that is good. It can then amplify these discoveries to build a future where the best becomes more common.

AI does not negate nor ignore problems. Rather, it shifts the frame of reference that is used to define what is happening. Instead of looking for what's wrong or needs fixing (a deficit-based approach), the organisation focuses on what's right and what's working and seeks to do more of it (a strength-based approach). In short, AI suggests that you can create change by paying attention to what you want rather than paying attention to problems. It is based on the following assumptions<sup>3</sup>:

- In every society, organisation, or group, something works.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Sue Annis Hammond, (1998) 2nd Edition. The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry Plano, Texas: Thin Book Publishing Company, 20-21.

- Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
- The act of asking questions of an organisation or groups influences the group in some way.
- People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
- If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.
- It is important to value differences.
- The language we use creates our reality.

The process of AI focuses on structured conversations and whole of organisation participation in the change process. AI searches for success stories which are shared throughout the organisation. Individuals are recognised and affirmed as contributing and successful members of the organisation. Confidence and commitment to more success begin to permeate the individual and organisational belief systems.

Appreciative Inquiry involves five phases. First, choosing an *affirmative topic* as the focus of the inquiry. As a premise of AI is that we move towards whatever we study, the selection of a topic is the foundation of the entire process. The topics should be bold enough to stretch the organisation to focus on something it really wants to see happen and that has the potential to energise people, mobilise forces, and be strategic. Second, *discovering* what gives life to an organisation and acknowledging the best of what is now. Third, *dreaming* of what might be to create a clear results-

oriented vision for the future. Fourth, *designing* what should be by collaboratively co-creating action plans. Fifth, *delivering* the results through implementation and review. At an organisational level, if the AI process of positive transformation is supported through empowering employees to connect, cooperate and co-create, the results will continue to surface in new, innovate, and bold ways.

The AI process can be adapted to almost any situation including strategic planning, diversity management, or any other critical issue related to the functioning of the organisation. AI is a whole-of-organisation process and a range of stakeholders participate in the process which can last from a few days to several months. It is increasingly being recognized that effective change takes place from the conversations that we have, stories that we tell and relationships that we establish.

As a strength-based approach to change, AI aligns well with an ecological perspective. It is an emergent, self-organising, interconnected process which reinforces a consultative, collaborative, participatory approach to organisational change and growth which involves all stakeholders in taking responsibility for personal and organisational change.

### **Time for transition**

People need time to reflect and work out ways of moving from the industrial era to working and learning in the knowledge era. They need time to work out when mechanistic, standardised ways are the most efficient and effective way forward and

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when openness, trust, self organising systems and creativity is needed. Development of capability needs to be characterised by variety, personal choice, conversations, generosity, adaptation and recognition of the iterative process that work and learning is. The aim is sustainable and resilient workplaces. The focus needs to be on 'reculturing' and 'reshaping' through positive and strength based approaches, which are underpinned by values, rather than on short term solutions focusing on structures and restructuring that often result in superficial change.

The research findings will provide the concepts, theories, guidelines and a range of practical approaches within a business framework. The application and planning must be done in context – by individuals and teams, taking into account their local issues, needs and requirements. The researchers have found that there have been many that have been deeply touched and encouraged by the research.

The final research report will be available on both the TAFE NSW ICVET website and the DEST website by the end of March 2006.

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