

# **Synthesising VET Market Research to Improve Real VET Participation**

Paul Harvey

Intacam Pty Ltd (Consultant)

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

## **Abstract**

“VET is not for clever people”. This observation, contained within one of four research projects commissioned by the Joint National Communications Project, lay at the heart of identifying how improved promotion of vocational education and training (VET) could increase participation by improving public perceptions of VET.

The range of topics, the different research methods and the volume of detail made it difficult to establish a manageable framework to analyse the combined impact of the findings on the perception and status of VET. The challenge became how to align and synthesise the findings with VET policy and practice and the needs of participants to inform practical solutions that could gain traction in addressing Australia’s skill needs amongst target groups of interest through improved promotion.

A tailored cause and effect analysis was introduced to isolate and document those issues within each research project that appeared to point to shortcomings in VET promotion. Eighty issues were mapped against eight key VET delivery success factors and then aggregated and ranked to provide the foundation for subsequent macro issue identification and action analysis. Seven macro issues were identified, leading to thirty suggested corrective actions.

A final report titled: **VET - An Integrated Marketing Action Agenda<sup>1</sup>**, synthesised the analysis into a practical priority-setting and decision-making framework and demonstrated the real ability of VET research to inform promotion of the public perceptions of VET by aligning policy and practice with the needs of participants and other key factors through tailored cause and effect analysis.

The method is repeatable and provided the Joint National Communications Project with the opportunity to transcend the complexities of the research topics and differing methods and report styles to support corrective action decision-making. The method also provided comfort that issues concealed within the detail had been exposed and appropriately considered within a strategically-focused analytical framework.

## **Introduction**

The Joint National Communications Project is a joint Commonwealth, state and territory governments initiative of the *2005-2008 Commonwealth-State Agreement for Skilling Australia's Workforce*. The project aims to improve public perceptions of VET, particularly in the traditional trades. It was initiated to ensure that the national training system is well placed to meet the challenges confronting the nation, industry, community and clients by raising the profile of VET as a valid choice of further education and a rewarding pathway for young people and those wishing to re-enter the workforce. It is managed by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (the department).

Decisions about the effective marketing of VET should sensibly be made on the basis of sound market research. The VET market place has grown to become large, multi-layered and difficult to research in an integrated way. More often than not the input of market research to VET promotional actions has been sparing. The market is awash with a wide variety of materials and approaches; much of it shown by the research to be poorly targeted, overlapping and confusing to prospective VET participants. The current marketing of VET clearly does not help to improve real VET participation.

In order to guide marketing decision-making, four pieces of research were commissioned by the department for the JNCP in 2007 and 2008, to:

- conduct a baseline study of current attitudes to, and knowledge of VET;
- identify generational engagement strategies for key VET target audiences;
- examine how VET was portrayed in the media during 2007; and

- conduct an environmental scan of VET marketing and communications activity taking place in Australia.

The topic of each project was selected on the basis that it was regarded as likely to help explore and understand the influence that each topic might have on the perceptions of VET, and thereby the flow of people into and retention in VET. The research was conducted by four separate research specialists to find information from the following target groups of interest:

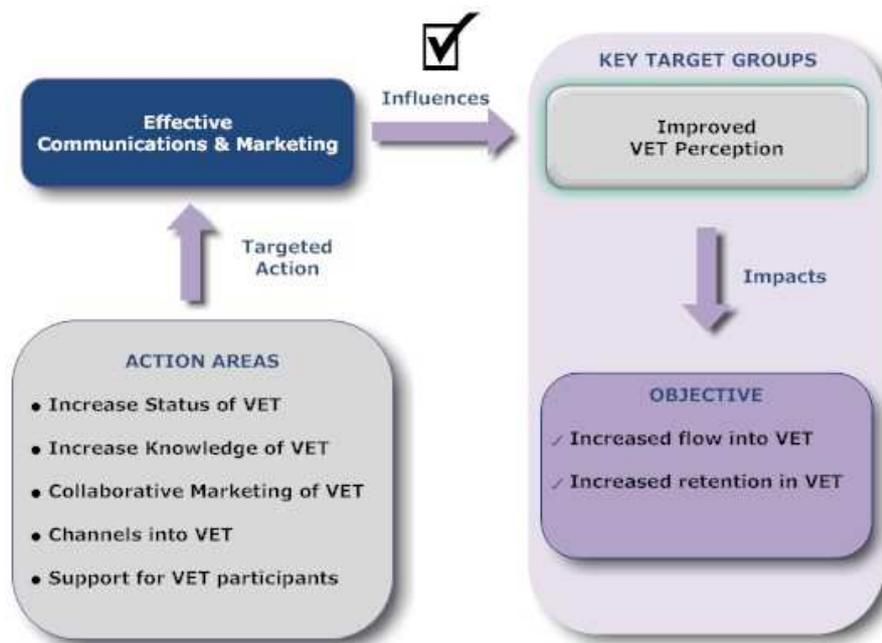
- young people leaving school and not involved in vocational training;
- older people, both those employed and not employed, who have no post-secondary qualifications;
- those with post-secondary qualifications who may have been considering a change in their work or considering re-entering the workforce – regarded as contemplating re-skilling;
- those who may simply have wanted to re-fresh their skills in an existing profession and were therefore interested in up-skilling; and
- those regarded as influencers, namely: career advisers, employers, parents and the general community.

The research projects led to hundreds of pages of comments, findings and supporting data. The final synthesis report was subsequently required to identify and focus on corrective actions in areas of priority determined by the JNCP during its research and development phase as having the greatest potential to influence participation in VET. The corrective action areas and the related perceived key issues were:

- increasing the status of VET - that is, improving the esteem of VET by individuals and key influencers compared to other education options, the perceived issue being: low status of VET;
- increasing the knowledge of VET - that is, improving general information about VET and the career options enabled by VET qualifications, the perceived issue being: low knowledge of VET;

- improving collaborative marketing of VET - that is, improving stakeholder collaboration and coordination for more effective VET marketing, the perceived issue being: fragmented marketing of VET;
- improving channels into VET - that is, improving and tailoring information about how participants could get into VET, and related decision support services, the perceived issue being: unclear channels into VET; and
- improving support for VET participants - that is, improving the accessibility of support information for participants already in the system, the perceived issue being: unclear VET support sources.

The expected influence of these action areas on increasing the flow into and retention of people in VET through targeted communications and marketing action is represented in the following diagram, noting that successful action in one area may also support the impact of action in other areas.



**Figure 1 – Action Area Influence on VET Perception and Objective**

The research projects are not specifically dealt with in this paper; they are the subject of separate publications released by the department. What is described is the

analytical approach taken to meet final report requirements for an integrated action framework.

### **Analytical Framework and Conceptual Models**

Establishing an appropriate analytical method proved challenging. The range of topics covered, the different research methods, the significant volume of research detail and the differing research styles made it difficult, initially, to create a manageable framework to analyse the combined impact of the research issues and findings on the perceptions and status of VET.

The key challenge became how to correlate and synthesise the research findings with VET policy and practice, the needs of participants and the specified corrective action areas, to inform practical solutions that could gain traction in addressing Australia's skill needs amongst target groups through improved communications and marketing. A consistent method of analysis needed to be adopted to achieve a common approach to corrective action identification regardless of research content and style.

The first step was to look beyond the contrasting form, style and volume of research detail to identify *issues* that appeared to be relevant in terms of having some influence on the take-up, or not, of VET. The presumption was that issues should be deducible irrespective of the form, style and volume of research.

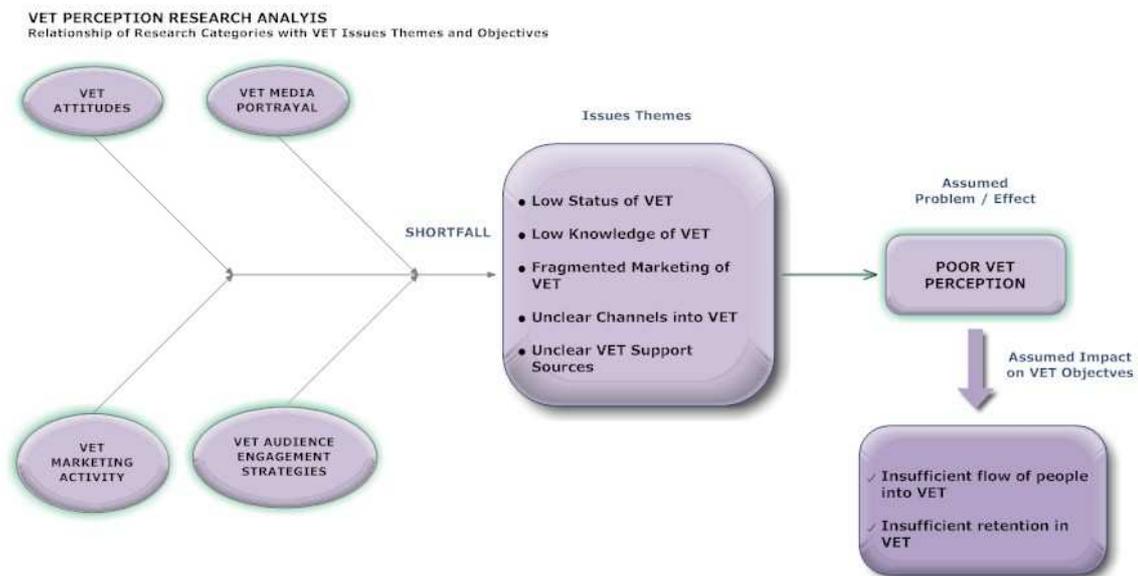
It was critical for that purpose that a framework was created within which identified issues could be listed and categorised under a manageable set of influencing factors, consistent across each research project and where those factors were regarded as meaningful to the promotion and status of VET. A means of illustrating the influence of these factors on the target outcome was also regarded as important for concept communication and led to the consideration of cause and effect 'fishbone' diagrams as a way of depicting the influence of key factors and capturing relevant issues under those key factors.

The objective of cause and effect diagrams is corrective action and their use supports the organisation and display of influencing relationships between research issues and VET perception and, correspondingly, the flow of people into and their retention in

VET. Cause and effect analysis could be applied equally across all four research projects. Each research project topic was labelled as an ‘influence category’ for the purposes of analysis, as follows:

- VET Attitudes;
- VET Marketing Activity;
- VET Media Portrayal; and
- VET Audience Engagement Strategies.

The following high level model guided analysis of each of the VET research projects and their relationship to the issues themes specified by the JNCP as requiring corrective action:



**Figure 2 – VET Research Category Influence Relationship**

Cause and effect analysis also supports a range of industry-specific delivery success factors that can be used to identify key influences affecting a described outcome, whether implemented in a positive or negative fashion. Such success factors are capable of being tailored to the specific characteristics of a particular industry sector.

VET can be regarded as a service and administration industry for cause and effect analysis. In consultation with the department it was concluded that eight key communication and marketing success factors could influence the positive or negative perceptions and status of VET, depending on how well they were implemented:

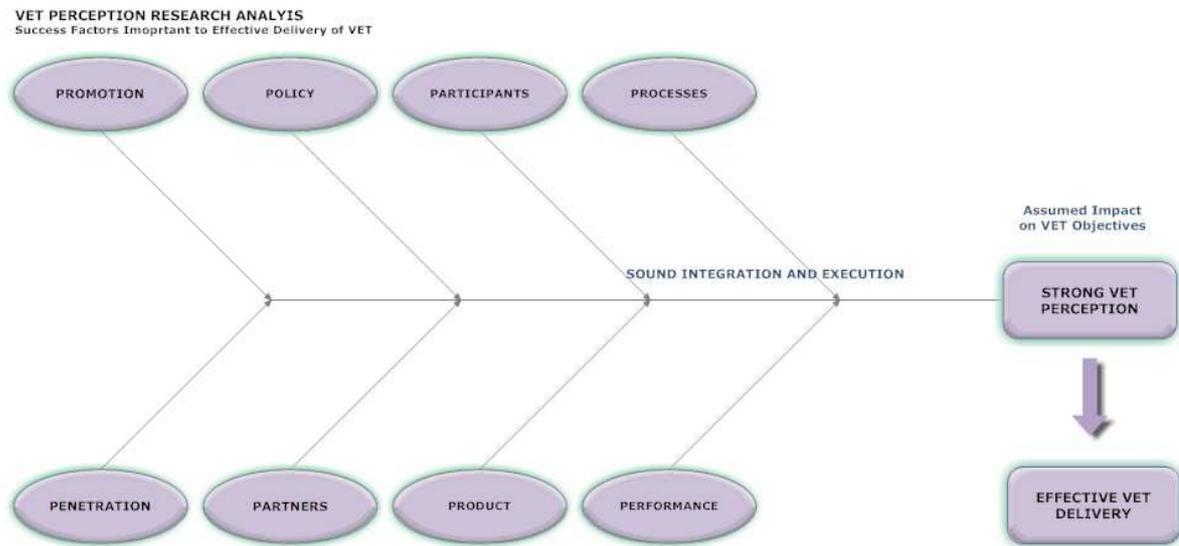
Success Factor	Thrust
Policy	Communication and marketing-related policies created to support the delivery of VET products and services.
Penetration	Mechanisms used to cut through and reach VET target audiences with product information and services.
Promotion	Arrangements used to target and promote VET products and services to key audiences.
Partners	Arrangements used to target and work with partners needed to help deliver and influence the use of VET products and services.
Product	Design, operation and utility of those VET products and services that form the cornerstone of VET communication and marketing – that is, what is available through VET?
Processes	Processes and procedures created to manage and support delivery and use of VET products and services.
Participants	Arrangements used to target and work with prospective and signed-up VET participants.
Performance	Arrangements used to monitor and manage the performance of VET products and services and the overall VET delivery framework.

**Table 1 – Success Factors Influencing Perception and Status of VET**

The premise of this approach was that the effective delivery of VET communication and marketing requires the sound, integrated execution of a range of key success factors. Examined from this perspective, and taking a corrective action approach, the research analysis might reveal shortfalls or inadequacies in the performance of VET communication and marketing that could be targeted for further action - that is, it was assumed that communication and marketing shortfalls in these key success areas were contributing to the poor or negative perceptions of VET, with the overall impact being an insufficient flow of and retention of key target groups into VET. It was expected that a thorough analysis of each research topic would reveal such shortfalls, and thereby support the identification of corrective action(s) to address those shortfalls.

The need to allocate issues across more than one success factor was anticipated given the need to drive action on a number of fronts to effectively deliver VET. The

combined influence of these success factors on VET perception, and on the effective delivery of VET, is illustrated in the following model used to conceptually guide the research analysis:



**Figure 3 – VET Delivery Success Factors**

The detailed research analysis was not intended to suggest that the VET system had been inadequate in dealing with the research matters presented. Rather, the identification of an issue as a shortfall or an inadequacy was a method adopted to stimulate thinking about corrective action based on a philosophy of continuous improvement.

**Containing the Scope of Analysis**

The detailed analysis and report was not expected to investigate issues beyond communication and marketing or outside the scope of the research that may hinder participation and therefore equally affect the perceptions of VET. It was understood that while communication and marketing could successfully explain and promote VET, as well as soften apparent objections and build demand for its offerings, there may still be barriers that improved communication and marketing alone could not overcome in any sustainable way.

It was determined that out-of-scope issues identified through the analysis would be referred for consideration by resources outside the JNCP with such referrals being

monitored by the JNCP so that, where improvements could be made, supporting communication and marketing could be planned.

### Managing Data Volumes While Maintaining Analytical Integrity

The volume of data to be examined within each research project made it difficult to capture and show all of the detected issues under their related influencing factors without moving to large and complex diagrams which also ran the risk of losing issue connectivity and analytical integrity. It was determined that an issues database should be established, based on the influence relationship conceptual model described earlier, to allow issues from each research topic to be consistently treated and related to the eight key delivery success factors and the five required corrective action areas specified by the JNCP.

Issues identified from each research project were to be numbered, given a name and attributed against a success factor category and other categories in the database for traceability purposes. An illustration of the data entry environment follows:

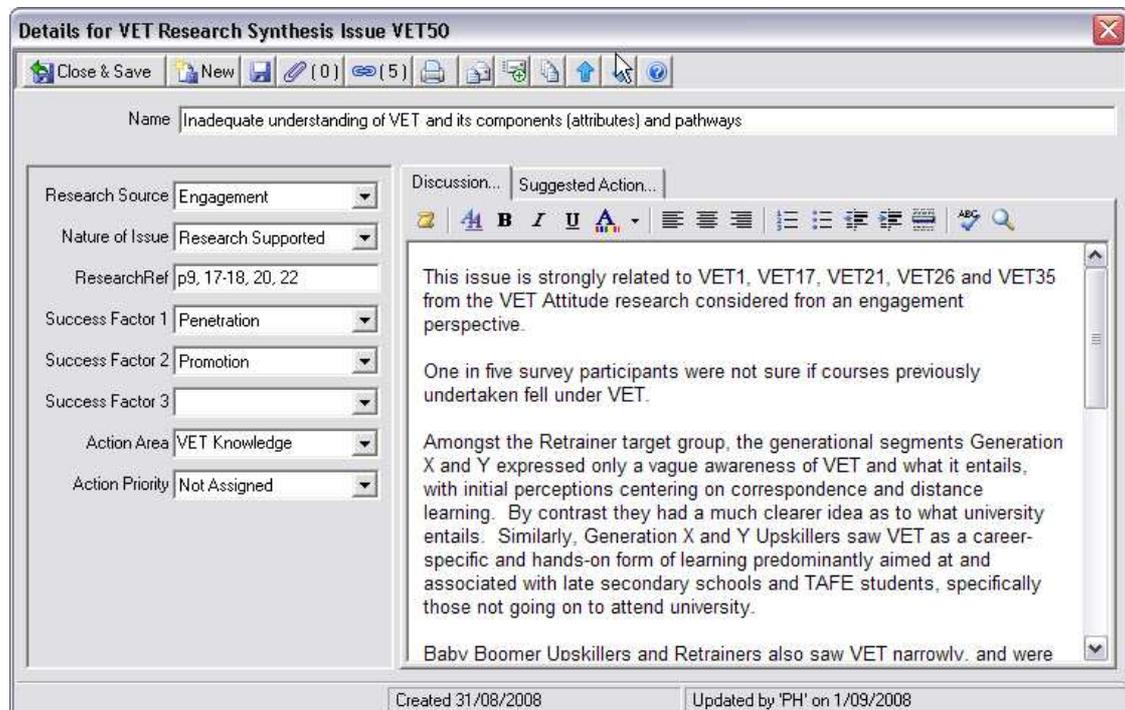


Figure 4 – Issues Database Data Entry View

The data entry environment highlights the ability to easily enter the Issue Name and then associate that issue with:

- *Research Source*: the name of the research project topic;
- *Nature of Issue*: whether the issue appeared to be specifically supported by the research or was a suggested issue inferred from the research;
- *Research Ref*: where, for traceability purposes, the described issue could be located in the research;
- *Success Factor 1*: the primary delivery success factor with which the issue appeared to be related;
- *Success Factor 2*: the secondary delivery success factor with which the issue appeared to be related - category overlap was anticipated given the need to drive action on a number of fronts to effectively deliver VET – for example overlap in shortfalls across VET Policy and Promotion;
- *Action Area*: the JNCP action area under which the issue might suitably be addressed;
- *Action Priority*: the priority with which action to address the issue might need to be addressed;
- *Discussion*: narrative discussion of the relevance and impact of the issue and its relationship with other issues; and
- *Suggested Action*: suggested action for dealing with the issue for consideration by the JNCP.

The data entry mechanism also permitted any issue to be linked within the database to any other issue, supporting the ability to more easily establish a macro view of like issues for more manageable analysis. This consistent method of data capture provided the foundation for a comprehensive count, discussion and analysis of the issues within each of the four research topics, including the ability to filter views and reports based on a range of criteria.

The identification of issues and the linking of issues in the database was time-consuming and relied on a thorough analysis and discussion of the details and findings of each research project. This part of the method was necessarily subjective and

relied on an ability to draw out and accurately link perceived shortcomings in delivery success factors that might impact the perception and status of VET.

Each research paper was processed independently and formed the basis of an individual research summary report to the department. The department was invited to review and validate the initial analysis of each issue to be sure it held the same view of apparent shortcomings, prior to the development of the final synthesised report.

### **Results of Analysis**

53 specific issues were revealed by the analysis; however, the re-occurrence of the same or similar issues led to a total of 80 issue mentions. Those issues were related as shown below to the priority action areas determined by the JNCP, listed in order of frequency of occurrence:

Action Area	Principal Issue	No. Issue Mentions
Increase Knowledge of VET	Low Knowledge of VET	43
Collaborative Marketing of VET	Fragmented Marketing of VET	17
Increase Status of VET	Low Status of VET	13
Channels into VET	Unclear Channels into VET	7
Support for VET Participants	Unclear VET Support Services	0
TOTAL		80

**Table 2 – Action Area Issue Analysis**

The allocation of issues in this way led to a greater understanding about where the weight of corrective action needed to be focused. For example, it was clear that increasing knowledge of VET was a high priority action area.

Those same 80 issue mentions were also correlated and counted against a primary VET delivery success factor, as described below:

Success Factor	Thrust	No. Related Issues
Policy	Communication and marketing-related policies created to support the delivery of VET products and services.	19
Penetration	Mechanisms used to cut through and reach VET target audiences with product information and services.	18
Promotion	Arrangements used to target and promote VET products and services to key audiences.	17
Partners	Arrangements used to target and work with those partners needed to help deliver and influence the use of VET products and services.	7
Product	Design, operation and utility of VET products and services that form the cornerstone of VET communication and marketing.	7
Processes	Processes and procedures created to manage and support delivery and use of VET products and services.	7
Participants	Arrangements used to target and work with prospective and signed-up VET participants.	5
Performance	Arrangements used to monitor and manage the performance of VET products and services and the overall VET delivery framework.	0
TOTAL		80

**Table 3 – Primary Success Area Issue Analysis**

The purpose of the allocation was to highlight in a more specific way where shortfalls in the performance of a success factor appeared to be occurring and to identify where the weight of corrective action appeared to be needed to improve the perception, raised status and increased take-up of VET. A low number of allocations, or even a single allocation of an issue to a success factor, was not interpreted to mean that concerted action was not required in the relevant area. The allocation of a single issue to a success area may have represented a high priority need for action, if shortfalls in that area were regarded as significantly affecting VET perception and take-up.

### **Synthesising Issues for Corrective Action**

The corrective action focus of the analysis, which follows the 80/20 rule, suggested that key issues, and not necessarily all 53 issues identified, should sensibly be dealt

with from the perspective of priority of activity. When examined at a composite level, and allowing for the issue linkages that had been established, it was clear that many of the 53 issues across the research projects overlapped or represented subtle variations of the same general theme.

The issues were therefore regarded as capable of being synthesised and elevated to macro areas of similarity to identify corrective action options and areas of focus that could cover more than one issue. This was preferable to identifying potentially-overlapping or non-integrated point solutions at the level of each of 53 individual issues. The issues were accordingly synthesized, as described below, into seven (7) macro issue categories and presented to the department for validation, to create a manageable foundation for suitable corrective actions.

No.	Macro Issue	Related Issue Mention Count
1.	Inadequate VET sector marketing and promotional strategy guidance	25
2.	Inadequate VET story and promotional strategies	19
3.	Inadequate Influencer engagement policy and promotional strategies	14
4.	Inadequate VET governance focus and priority on communication and marketing	10
5.	Inadequate VET branding strategy	8
6.	Inadequate coordination of VET information outlets	2
7.	Inadequate VET product development	2
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>80</b>

**Table 5 – Macro Issue Analysis**

## **Conclusion**

The manageable set of macro issues derived through issue aggregation and synthesis from contrasting styles and volumes of research considerably improved the ability of the JNCP to prioritise and turn into a focused action plan, a long list of suggested corrective actions. Whilst the overall approach may appear complex, it was intended simply to tease out and set up a framework for identifying and systematically capturing and connecting common issues across the research topics that, in particular, appeared to point to shortcomings or inadequacies in VET communications and marketing.

The presumption was that such matters would negatively influence the perceptions and status of VET and that, having been identified and validated, corrective action could be considered. The method is regarded as repeatable and provided an opportunity to transcend the complexities of a wide set of VET research topics. The method has also provided comfort to the JNCP that issues concealed within the research detail have been exposed and appropriately considered within a strategically-focused analytical framework aligned to its requirements for areas of action.

The method has demonstrated the real ability of VET research to inform promotion of the public perceptions of VET by aligning policy and practice with the needs of participants and other key success factors through tailored cause and effect analysis.

---

## References

<sup>i</sup> Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Joint National Communications Project (2008). VET – An Integrated Marketing Action Agenda.