

EARLY DAYS:

A personal review of a research into practice initiative

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1. Abstract

This paper provides participant reflections from one of ten researchers involved in an NCVET sponsored 'Building Researcher Capacity in the VET Sector' scheme in 2008. In this scheme, early career VET researchers are supported to undertake work-based research projects in a community of practice to develop their research capacity.

'Early Days' intends to do two things: firstly, to provide an interim account of the data collected through surveys and focus group interviews for the research project: *'The experiences of early vocational education and training programs for young Aboriginal learners: perceptions of practitioners and young people'*. Key findings and discussions emerging from the program and the research are presented to inform practitioners in designing, delivering and supporting early VET programs for such learners.

Secondly, it aims to be of general practical assistance to early VET researchers and the experienced VET researchers and mentors supporting them. Including personal reflections on the researcher community of practice, the paper discusses the mentoring received through the AVETRA network and the support received by the participants and organizations included in the research.

Each section of this paper will address the research **project** - *'Experiences of early vocational education and training programs for young Aboriginal learners: perceptions of practitioners and young people'*. It will also explore the research **process** – the research methodologies selected and support received through the *'NCVER Building Researcher Capacity Community of Practice'*.

2. Introduction

The research project *'Experiences of early vocational education and training programs for young Aboriginal learners: perceptions of practitioners and young people'* is based upon the V Tracks program implemented by North Coast Aboriginal Learning Partnerships (NCALP) North Coast (NC) TAFE in 2008. V Tracks is an early intervention learning program for young Aboriginal high school students on the North Coast of New South Wales which concentrates on strategic and collaborative partnerships between TAFE and schools to increase the retention and engagement of these learners in education, employment and training. This is because it is young Aboriginal students who experience disproportionately low rates of high school completion (less than half that achieved by non-Aboriginal students) and associated workplace and social disadvantage (NSW Government, 2008, p. 9).

The need for collaboration and early intervention is made more critical by the demographics of the North Coast of New South Wales where on average, around 8 per cent of all people are Aboriginal. Unlike wider regional areas, this population is dramatically skewed towards youth with between 40 and 50 per cent of all Aboriginal people on the North Coast between 5 and 24 years of age (ABS, 2007).

A key strategy for delivering on the objectives of increased high school completions and improved pathways to education, employment and training is increasing the availability of Vocational Education and Training (VET) to Stage 5 school students. Through a focus on TAFE taster programs and school-based vocational learning in the earlier years of secondary schooling, V Tracks seeks to provide young Aboriginal learners with opportunities to taste, think about, choose and plan school and vocational pathways whilst exploring individual, workplace, educational and Indigenous cultural values.

In 2008, nine V Tracks programs were delivered across 40 North Coast schools and 14 TAFE campuses. Whilst each program was custom-designed at a local school cluster level - according to students' interests, existing school programs and identified skills shortage areas, they all followed a uniform three-stage progression. First, an Open 'Expo' Day at the TAFE campuses where students were: Welcomed to Country by invited Elders, parents and community members; shown the vocational learning opportunities available to them at TAFE; introduced to the

NCALP Aboriginal Student Support Officers, teaching and administration staff; and encouraged to participate in motivational sessions, dances or ceremonies with local and cultural role models.

The second stage invited students to enroll in two workshops in two different industry areas. These workshop days targeted primarily Years 8, 9 and 10 students and in most cases saw the students completing short projects. Thirdly, sustained programs in one or two industry areas were offered to the students at higher risk of early school-leaving – predominantly those in Years 9 and 10. For example, a group might have participated in four weeks of Metals and Engineering before moving into four weeks of Electro technology, however the variations in industry areas and program structures across the region were very diverse.

Because relatively little is known about the experiences of earlier VET programs for Aboriginal learners, it was essential to critically evaluate V Tracks through a systematic review with the students, school and TAFE staff involved in the program's pilot year. This would allow NC TAFE and NCALP to use evidence to develop better practice in working with young Aboriginal learners and school partners. The NCVET Building Researcher Capacity scheme therefore presented an opportunity to undertake this work-based research and also align to the purpose and values of the NC TAFE Charter. Specifically engagement in the work-based research project aligned to the institute's strategic improvement areas of: re-positioning Aboriginal education and training to strengthen cultural, social and economic sustainability in Aboriginal communities; systematically listening to learners and communities needs and adapting programs to meet these; building a culture of collaboration; and supporting and developing creativity and talents as high-performing adaptable VET practitioners.

In summary, the foundations for the research project were laid through retention and engagement of young Aboriginal learners in education, employment and training being key priority areas for governments, the North Coast region and NC TAFE. The NCVET Building Researcher Capacity scheme provided a transparent framework to complete the work-based research project with recognition and support from the organizations participating and also the network of experienced VET researchers and mentors.

3. Literature Review

The Exploring Multiple Pathways for Indigenous Students: Discussion Paper (2001) released by the MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education reveals that increasing high school completion rates and education, employment and training pathways for young Aboriginal learners have been key priority and policy areas for many Australian governments and education systems for some time. It also reveals that a significant response to such goals and policy objectives has been expansion of Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs for young people, including VET in Schools (VETiS) and TAFE-Based VET (TVET) programs, herein collectively referred to as school VET programs.

Most formal school VET programs over the last decade have however, been aimed at Senior (Years 11 and 12) students and therefore mostly been evaluated in relation to, or by, Senior School students. This historic lack of provision of earlier VET programs in schools is naturally accompanied by gaps in existing literature on the experiences of younger students engaged in earlier school VET programs, and in particular, the experiences of younger Aboriginal students and the school and TAFE staff teaching and supporting them.

Vickers (2005) for example, emphasises the need for early school leaving and school to work disengagement to be tackled earlier and more collaboratively - revealing that young people who leave school early have often made that decision early in their high-school careers. Students who stated (in Year 9 or earlier) that they would not be in Year 12 were 'seven times more likely to leave before completing school than were students with higher aspirations' (Vickers, 2005, p 121). Anlezark, Karmel and Ong (2006) join Vickers in questioning whether VET programs should therefore be re-focused on Year 10 students, given that many early school leavers do not get to Year 11.

Vickers also finds three major themes which emerge in young peoples' motivations for wanting to leave school early. The first group of reasons relates to work, or perceptions of school as making little or no difference to employment prospects; the second are school-related, for example not liking school or teachers, or failing to find school a happy and satisfying place to be; the third relate to unmet survival needs, including personal and family-related factors. It is the second set of reasons and corresponding examination of curriculum and program issues that is most relevant to this research, along with the observation that up to 15 per cent of early school

leavers do so because school either does not offer the course they want, or offers courses of little relevance or interest to them: 'a lack of curriculum choice in the lower secondary school leads some students to lose heart, believing that high school will not offer them the job training they want in order to prepare them for work' (Vickers, 2005, p 122). This draws on the research conducted by Pitman and Herschel and their corresponding examination of curriculum and program issues in schools.

Pitman and Herschel's (2002) research found that many young students were unaware that the senior curriculum included accredited vocational studies (VET) and that these students might remain in school if they could study 'something relevant'. This corresponds to the *Destination and Satisfaction Survey of 2004 HSC VET students in New South Wales* where 60% of HSC VET students reported that VET played a key role in keeping them at school, a figure rising to 70% for students with the lowest Year 10 achievement profiles - those most at risk of early leaving (Polesel et al, 2005). Whilst this has led to some states introducing VET programs and 'taster' courses in Years 9 and 10 of school, again there is little reflection and feedback for practitioners and policy makers in developing, continuing and supporting earlier VET programs, and those for Aboriginal learners in particular.

Helme and Hill (2004) draw from the *Young Visions Survey* and *Hands on the Future*, both national studies of Indigenous students' experiences of VETiS, to identify four key roles of VET for Indigenous students: improving engagement with school and curriculum; broadening pathway options; providing workplace experience; and providing a pathway to employment. They cite several studies which have explored the capacity of VETiS to improve schooling and post-schooling options for Indigenous students however once again, these studies are restricted mostly to experiences of VET for senior school students, and also VETiS, as distinct from TAFE delivered VET (TVET).

In summary, it is understood that decisions to leave school early often occur in Years 8 and 9 and that VET plays a significant role in retaining young people, otherwise at risk of dropping out, at school. What we know less about are the experiences of *early* vocational education and training programs for *younger* Aboriginal learners - the perceptions of both young people and practitioners.

The NCVET Building Researcher Capacity scheme, and associated community of practice, therefore presented an opportunity to work towards bridging this information and evidence gap

through a V Tracks-based research project. Wenger (2009), who originally applied the concept of communities of practice, believes that communities of practice create direct links between learning and performance and enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need. Formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour, Wenger describes three essential factors for successful communities of practice. Firstly, the *domain* defines the key issues and area of shared enquiry - in this case building researcher capacity in the VET sector and contributing to bodies of VET research. The second factor is the *community* – the relationships and sense of belonging amongst members – in this scheme, the scholarship recipients meeting to discuss and share knowledge. Thirdly, the *practice* refers to the body of knowledge, methods, stories, tools and documents created by the community – not only the final papers for NCVET publication and wider VET application, but also the knowledge base created about VET research and the experiences of new researchers in particular.

4. Research method

The community of practice, facilitated by Victoria University through the Centre for Vocational and Workbased Education Research initially met for a two day workshop at the University. During this time, experienced researchers worked with the participants to map a relational framework for the community of practice, including strategies for how the participants might work and communicate with each other, key ideas and issues around research methodologies and resources, design of research ideas and proposals, and NCVET requirements for review and publication of the final papers. The AVETRA Network also provided mentoring guidelines, draft mentoring contracts and a register of senior researchers who had volunteered to be part of the network supporting the community of practice participants. The new researchers identified mentors within their relevant fields, with whom they would be matched through AVETRA.

The relationship with the mentor, Associate Professor Barry Golding, was established early in this research project and strengthened through a face to face meeting together with the Director of NCALP, with whom Professor Golding had collaborated in the past. How the V Tracks program and the research sat within NCALP's and North Coast TAFE's priorities was discussed as were overviews of competing priorities, workloads and commitments throughout the year, and what these meant for the research project and the mentoring relationship.

Before commencing the research, written authorization was obtained from the Schools' Regional Aboriginal Programs Team Leader and the Director of North Coast TAFE, in accordance with the State Education Research Approval Process (SERAP) NSW Department of Education and Training (DET). Plain language statements describing the purpose, procedures, benefits, risks, ethical guidelines and voluntary nature of the research were returned with written consent from the School and TAFE research participants. Conducting research with learners under the age of 18 and with Aboriginal learners is complex, however the anonymity of the research meant that providing approval had been received from the school sector, and endorsement received from the Regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, the research was supported.

Two methodologies were selected for the research project and applied across five of the nine V Tracks Programs. Firstly, a 33 question survey was completed by 80 V Tracks students, from Years 8 to 10. Secondly, small (4 to 5 member) focus group interviews were conducted with 25 students, 24 school staff and 22 TAFE staff. The school staff included Principals, Careers Advisers, VET Coordinators, Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) and Workers (AEWs); the TAFE staff included V Tracks teachers, Head Teachers, VET coordinators and Aboriginal Student Support Officers (ASSOs) – all of whom had significant involvement in the design, delivery and support of the V Tracks programs. The survey and focus group questions related to V Tracks and: future pathways; attitudes to school; the structure of the V Tracks program; student support; the TAFE learning environment; and notions of self efficacy.

5. Findings and Discussions

Many positive outcomes of the V Tracks program were described by the students, school staff and TAFE staff included in the research. An overview of these is provide below, together with perceptions related to challenges of the programs and strategies for meeting these.

(i) V Tracks and future pathways

Students agreed that V Tracks had:

- Provided greater insight into future study options at school – 74%
- Provided greater insight into future study options at TAFE – 79%
- Provided greater insight into future career and job options – 84%
- Taught them more about the skills needed for work – 84%

- Given them confidence in thinking they could do part time or full time work – 69% and
- Helped them see a link between learning at School or TAFE and the world of work – 74%

'For the undecided it definitely helped...there were two girls who decided that they wanted to stay at school...they had a realization of the steps needed to get where they wanted to go' (School Careers Adviser).

'There's a big difference between hearing about options and seeing options' (School AEO.)

'Its helped me talk with them more about work experience, subject selections and all sorts of things' (School Careers Adviser).

However, only 38% of students said they had more information about TVET in Years 11 and 12, and 49% described more awareness about School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBAT). These uncertainties regarding TVET and SBAT opportunities in senior school were reiterated during the focus groups:

'Is that what TVET means?..... Like when you go to TAFE one day a week and school the other days.... Yeah I know what you mean now' (V Tracks student).

'I found it really important to be mapping the pathways, including TVET and apprenticeships and jobs... all the time.... Its language they haven't even heard of and therefore aren't familiar with yet' (TAFE teacher).

'Some staff had really outdated views on what we offer through TAFE and TVET.... Cross-sectoral visits between school and TAFE staff would be great to update professional currency' (TAFE teacher).

A recommendation might be that early intervention programs such as V Tracks need to be explicit and consistent in identifying and discussing multiple pathways with students, making little assumption about the level of student or staff awareness regarding opportunities. An outcome from this research for example, has been the design of school and TAFE teacher delivery and implementation guides for V Tracks.

(ii) V Tracks and attitudes to school

Many students agreed that V Tracks had:

- Encouraged them to stay longer at school (eg to complete the High School Certificate) – 73%
- Encouraged them to attend school more – 64%

‘So many of them came back into school the next day, so proud of what they’d done. It was an incentive to be good – so there were big improvements in behavior and attitude’ (School AEO).

‘It’s like they’d had a realization and seen a bigger picture – that there’s something more, instead of us just going ‘you’ve got to be at school...you’ve got to be at school....you’ve got to be at school’ (School Coordinator).

‘There were other students in the school who hadn’t originally been selected because of conduct issues. When they saw and heard what they were missing out on, they envied the V Tracks students...Then they picked themselves up and improved their behavior and attendance at school so that they could be in the program too’ (School AEO).

‘Some students started to pay more attention in particular subjects, for example maths, because the TAFE teacher said how important it was to be able to do measurements and calculations’ (School Coordinator.)

‘It’s like a light was switched on, or they could see a light at the end of the tunnel’ (School VET Coordinator).

(iii) Structure of the V Tracks program

Consistent across all three groups was the belief that programs like V Tracks need to:

Target students most at risk of early school leaving *‘and not just Koori kids because they’re Koori’ (School Careers Adviser)*. School staff for example, recognized that clear guidelines for student selection would ensure that V Tracks programs specifically targeted young people who would benefit the most from the program, and not those students already on a clear academic pathway, a perspective with which students also agreed:

‘I knew already that I wanted to finish high school and go to university, so I didn’t want to miss out on school..... but for kids who don’t know what they want to do yet, its great’ (V Tracks student).

Target primarily Year 9 students for all program stages, with: Year 10 students included in early-year V Tracks activity before a focus on the School Certificate and Year 11 subject selection; Years 7 and 8 students supported in making a smooth transition into high school and understanding the importance of school.

'Younger kids wanted to know why they couldn't do it yet, but they need to get a taste of school first'... 'Going from primary to high school is hard enough' (V Tracks students). All three groups however, strongly supported the idea of making opportunities visible to all junior years, not only through the Open Days but also through sharing and role modeling back at the school between older students and younger students. 'The V Tracks students became leaders back at the school... they had an increased profile in the school yard' (School Coordinator).

Include meaningful learning, key competencies and assessments relevant to further study and 'real world' work skills.

'Students should have opportunities to include their V Tracks outcomes in school portfolios, or in authentic assessments they need to complete in key learning areas' (School Careers Adviser).

'Why can't V Tracks be a content-endorsed course or elective – counting towards the School Certificate?' (School VET Coordinator)

'It's not just about going to TAFE and having heaps of fun... what are the skills you'll learn for future education and the world of work? We don't want to set them up for a fall and we don't want to romanticize what they can do... so they turn up a year later for TVET and it's all a lot harder' (TAFE teacher).

Emphasize the value of *'practical, project-based, hands-on and real learning'* – recommendations repeated in all focus groups. *'It was fun and interesting doing real things instead of just learning for the sake of it' (V Tracks student).*

'It was good to finish something instead of going from one thing to another without finishing things' (V Tracks student).

'The program was all killer, no filler.... hard work in a short amount of time but all real and relevant' (School Deputy Principal).

Aim for continuity and regularity in timetabling: *'If it's a regular program, it becomes another routine for everyone and allows the students to get into a pattern, just like they'd be expected to at work' (School Coordinator).*

'We shouldn't be worried about the young people...those at greatest risk of dropping out... missing a day of school, because we'll lose them altogether if they don't do something like this' (School Principal).

'Our teacher made sure she didn't give any tests while we were at V Tracks most of the stuff we do at school just comes out of books anyway – so it's easy to catch up' (V Tracks student).

Encourage school executive, school to work committees, AEOs, AEWs, Head Teachers, Careers Advisers and additional school staff to accommodate the program so that students don't miss key teaching and assessment events in their mainstream curriculum, and aren't mistaken to be truant. *'My teacher didn't believe I'd been at TAFE the day before-hand, he thought I was wagging it' (V Tracks student.)*

'We weren't worried about missing out on school, because our teacher built V Tracks into what we were doing at school' (V Tracks student).

'V Tracks can be a part of the School to Work Planning and Personal Learning Plans that we're all supposed to work on with the kids anyway' (School AEO).

'V Tracks sits beautifully in the Work Education curriculum' (School VET Coordinator).

A recommendation from this is that schools and TAFE bring together consultants and learning and development officers to map school and earlier VET curricula to provide context, relevance and articulation pathways for the learners. That is, a preference for a multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral approach to retention and engagement of young Aboriginal learners was clearly expressed, so that programs like V Tracks are 'built in' and not 'bolted on' to existing school or TAFE programs.

Allow flexibility at the school cluster and community level to design activities that not only complement existing school curricula and programs as described above but meet the needs and

aspirations of the students included and match local skills shortage areas. *'Having time for the young people to identify or deepen a passion...and work on that...is important...that's where the energy develops and grows'* (School Coordinator).

'What's the point in learning if there's no job for us at the end of it? We don't want to learn things just for the sake of it' (V Tracks student).

Share knowledge and commitment at the school and TAFE executive, Head Teacher and administration levels so staff *'don't see it as another wishy washy black fella program'* (School Coordinator) and instead *'share a culture of excitement and excellence through a whole-of-school and whole-of-campus effort'* (TAFE staff member).

Encourage parental and wider community *'buy-in'* in terms of the program design and implementation: *'Kids see the value of a program if they see their parents running around like blue-assed flies to make it happen'*. *'Having the parents and community there on the Open Days was really important and magical'* (School staff member).

(iv) V Tracks – learners and the TAFE learning environment

97% of the students said they enjoyed going to the TAFE campus whilst the school and TAFE staff agreed that the young people rose to the expectations of an adult learning environment:

'The TAFE teachers got the young people to lift their attitudes and skills from the very beginning, by talking with them about what was expected of them at TAFE' (School Coordinator).

'There was a great sense of equality because the kids could call them (teachers) by their first name and relate on a personal level' (School AEO).

'The young people were able to step up in an adult environment and...act like adults so they could be treated like adults' (School staff member).

'The students would also monitor each others' behavior and 'rouse' if someone was 'mooglin' (playing) up...those students quickly fell back into line' (TAFE Aboriginal Student Support Officer).

'It was a great place to be... the teacher treated us like we weren't kids and acted like a normal everyday person... you still got in trouble if you did something wrong, but then things went back

to normal...it was just because the TAFE teacher was persistent in us getting things right' (V Tracks student).

Students were also impressed by the equipment and tools they were able to successfully use. *'I don't know why schools spend money on smart boards and plasma TVs and stuff.... Why don't they buy tools more useful in the real world?'* (V Tracks student).

School staff, students and TAFE staff all agreed that simply increasing the visibility of the VET learning environment had a great impact on the students and their identification of future pathways and possibilities. Opportunities for 'hands-on' learning provided the young people with greater awareness and appreciation of what they were capable of learning and 'doing' in a practical and real-world sense, outside of the traditional school classroom.

(v) V Tracks and student support

Provision of student support, through school and TAFE teachers, coordinators and Aboriginal support personnel was identified as important:

- The support of school staff, whilst I'm at TAFE, is important to me – 65% of students
- The support of TAFE staff, whilst I'm at TAFE, is important to me – 73% of students

'I've definitely noticed improved relationships with the students....there's been a building of trust and more awareness of my role' (School Careers Adviser).

The role of school staff in discussing curriculum and pathway options with students was emphasized, as was the strengthening of personal relationships - allowing young people to feel more connected to their learning, the adults supporting them and the adult learning environment. This relates to Vickers' findings about school-related reasons for young people wanting to leave school early – and their perceptions of whether they 'like' or engage with teachers and staff.

'It was important having the AEOs, ASSOs and even parents coming along....they would discipline in culturally appropriate ways.... Aunty saying 'this is my country, you respect this country while you're here' (TAFE Aboriginal Student Support Officer).

'It was good being better than, or as good as, the teacher....and learning together (V Tracks student.)

The roving flow of teachers from schools was wonderful – the students felt connected and proud’ (TAFE teacher).

It became clear however, that if school staff were present, or dropping into the workshops, that it was important for them to actively participate and support what was happening at the time:

‘If teachers were just up the back of the room, talking to each other..... or dropping in to remove a student to discuss something else (unrelated) with them.... this could be very disruptive’ (TAFE teacher).

The implications on school staff work-loads, to be released from school and able to provide such active support were raised numerous times:

‘It’s all well and good to advocate for one or two consistent school staff members to actively participate in the program, but is this built in funding wise?’ (School coordinator).

‘Or is it ‘more on top of’? If we believe in the need for these programs, which we do, we need to resource them’ (School Principal).

(vi) V Tracks and self efficacy

90% of the students agreed that V Tracks had given them confidence in learning new things and both school and TAFE staff reported students’ increased self-esteem, pride and confidence:

‘They weren’t afraid to ask questions....they had courage and resilience they hadn’t experienced before because they were all starting from a level playing field’ (School Coordinator).

‘Having more choice about what we learned was awesome and getting skills in so many different areas.... I had no idea I could do these things’ (V Tracks student).

The opportunities students had to self-manage small projects contributed to their sense of accomplishment, their identification of skills and natural aptitude and confidence to try new things: *‘It was cool taking something home, that you’d made all on your own and in one day!’ (V Tracks student).*

'It made me feel good about myselfI saw I was good at things that I didn't realize before...It was 'deadly'.... I was proud' (V Tracks student).

'It was incredible seeing kids you never would have thought... blossom' (School VET Coordinator.)

'One of our most disadvantaged young people is now first in line for everything – it brought him out of himself....one year 9 fella has been coming right out of his shell' (School AEO).

74% of students also believed V Tracks had given them a fresh start in a different learning program. *'It was a fresh start for many learners who had negative learning.....or behavioural historiesthere's no red cards or blue cards....just a new page for many of them (School Coordinator).*

'Three quarters of the kids talked about 'naughty cards' but at TAFE they started fresh' (TAFE teacher).

Overall, the students rated the V Tracks program very highly:

- 80% believed they had benefited from attending the program
- 84% would recommend the program to other students and
- 93% believed that programs like V Tracks should continue.

Both school and TAFE staff have already been guided by the interim findings of this study in considering how V Tracks can build on its strengths and address its identified challenges in 2009. For example, the program proposals and criteria now include reference to, or application of, key findings from the research whilst executive teams within both sectors have committed to making the findings available and recommended for professional, curriculum and resource support and development.

The support received through the community of practice was valuable to this researcher, in conducting the research, adhering to expectations and commitments, and feeling supported by colleagues who were developing similar skills and knowledge. The quantity and quality of time and support received from the formal mentor was especially critical throughout the research process, through face to face meetings, regular email and telephone calls. Firstly in providing

project management expertise in planning, developing and reviewing the research project and process – for example, in determining the research question and what it could potentially contribute to existing knowledge. Secondly, in providing coaching on research techniques, tools and tensions that could arise - recommending the use of more than one tool to gather information from young research participants and describing methods for keeping focus groups on track whilst allowing room for new directions or ideas to emerge. Finally, the mentor facilitated new and expanded networks and access to other bodies of research, researchers, and opportunities in VET research – for example, identifying additional critical friends and supporting and reviewing other small research projects. The mentoring relationship was pivotal.

6. Conclusions

Whilst research demonstrates that VET programs in the senior years of schooling can improve high school completion rates and pathways to further education, employment and training for Aboriginal students and students otherwise at risk of early school leaving, relatively little is known about the experiences of Aboriginal learners in earlier vocational education and training programs, nor the experiences of the practitioners supporting them.

The data collected through the research project *‘Experiences of early vocational education and training programs for young Aboriginal learners: perceptions of practitioners and young people’* aims to inform the practitioners involved in the design and implementation of V Tracks, and other early intervention programs for young Aboriginal learners on the North Coast of New South Wales. The intention is for this to translate into practice and improved outcomes for young Aboriginal learners in V Tracks and other early vocational education and training programs. Overall, many positive outcomes were described by the students, school staff and TAFE staff included in the research. Challenges, as opposed to obstacles, were also identified along with a willingness to address these challenges and continue to improve retention and engagement outcomes for young Aboriginal school students on the North Coast of New South Wales.

The NCVER Building Researcher Capacity in the VET sector scheme, through the community of practice and mentoring provided through AVETRA, offered a practical framework for identifying the experiences, perceptions and challenges around earlier VET programs for young Aboriginal learners. Participation in this work based research project has allowed NCALP and

North Coast TAFE to use action research and evidence to extend relations within a field of practice and knowledge whilst supporting a practitioner to develop work-based research skills and researcher capacity in the VET sector.

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