FROM THE PRESIDENT

Greetings to all AVETRA members!

At this time of the year, our attention turns to two important events – our annual conference and the call for research proposals to be funded under the National Vocational Education and Training Research (NVETR) Program. Both these events are key signifiers of the approaches that have underpinned and shaped the way in which VET research has developed over the years. These signifiers include the diversity of research in VET – in terms of its purposes, institutions and participants and the ways in which research speaks to policy, practice and the wider research community. These characteristics can be seen in the collection of research that has been selected for this edition of Research Today.

The articles reflect the wide expectations that governments have in terms of the policy agendas that the VET sector and its research activities are expected to address. Issues such as realising positive social, educational and economic outcomes for young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and women, enhancing employability and increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the VET sector are all featured in this collection. These articles are also very good examples of the strong connection that VET research has with policy. They show the real challenges that researchers face as they trace the contours of policy impact (the WAVE Report) to understand how polices are being enacted even as they are being changed or, even more sadly, aborted before their full impact can be understood (as in the case of the Foundation Skills project outlined by Louise Wignall).

Another key feature of the collection of articles is the ways in which they are positioned by their authors in terms of the potential impact that might be derived from their work. The research is focussed on sites where instrumental impact might be realised (Economic and Social Research Council 2015). In this case the research seeks to influence policy development and shape the practice and behaviours of people who engage with the VET sector in some way. The impact can also be conceptual in that it seeks to help us understand policy issues in new ways, and to reframe some long running debates about issues such as social inclusion and equity (Economic and Social Research Council 2015).

By any standard, VET research can be held up as a field that has been considering the thorny issues of the connections between research, policy and practice and impact for many years. Perhaps in this era where other fields of research activity and government agendas are now firmly eyeing these issues more seriously, VET research can be held up as being 'ahead of the curve' in these matters. It should be given due credit for its achievements which are showcased in our writing, our conferences and the quality of the research conducted across the sector. ■

Michele Simons – President, AVETRA

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Are neighbourhood characteristics important in predicting the post-school destinations of young Australians?

Chandra Shah, Monash University

The first key to designing effective policies for reducing intergenerational inequalities and improving social inclusion is to have a good understanding of the socioeconomic factors that drive educational outcomes for young people, including the pathways through which these factors operate.

Johnston et al. (2013) investigated the absolute and relative importance of the individual, parental and neighbourhood characteristics on the observed differences in the post-school destinations of a cohort of young Australians who were 15 years old in 2003. The main focus of the study was to understand the neighbourhood effects on student outcomes.

The study used data from the 2003 cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), which includes rich information on the characteristics of young people who were 15 years old in 2003, including the school they attended and their experience of transition from school to post-school destinations. These data were augmented by four neighbourhood characteristics—socioeconomic status, residential stability, household type and ethnic diversity—at the postcode level derived from the 2006 Census.

Student outcomes at age 15, 17 and 19 years were investigated in the study. Progressively more complex statistical models were estimated for each outcome to provide detail about the way neighbourhood characteristics affect student outcomes. First, only neighbourhood characteristics were included as control variables. Second, individual characteristics and parental characteristics were added as controls. Third, school fixed effects were added to control for the average observed and unobserved differences in the quality of schools and in the differences in the 'quality' of the student intake. Finally, in the models for outcomes at age 17 and 19 years, prior attributes of students (achievement, attitude, aspirations and application) measured at age 15 years were included as control variables.

Outcomes at age 15 years

In a model that also included individual and parental characteristics as control variables, all neighbourhood factors were found to be significant in predicting student achievement, application (time spent on homework) and aspiration (to complete a post-school qualification), but not attitudes (towards schooling), at age 15 years. The results showed that students living in less prosperous neighbourhoods were more likely to have VET aspirations.

The effects of neighbourhood factors were generally insignificant when school fixed effects were introduced into the model. This suggests that some differences in schools are because of neighbourhood effects and, therefore, removing school differences reduces the importance of neighbourhood effects. As many, though not all, students live in the neighbourhood where the school is located, the effect of neighbourhood socioeconomic status is to an extent mediated through the school fixed effects. Neighbourhood stability was found to exert an independent positive influence on students' achievement.

Outcome at age 17 years

Neighbourhood factors were once again found to be insignificant in predicting student outcome at age 17 years (whether the student was engaged in education and training or not) in the full model that included school fixed effects. Any positive effect from living in an advantaged area appears to work through the fact that these areas have 'better' schools that promote further education and training. All student attributes (achievement, aspiration, attitude and application) measured at age 15 years were also found to exert significant independent effect on the outcome.

Outcome at age 19 years

Finally the study investigated the neighbourhood effects on a student's outcome at age 19 years (VET, university or non-study). Neighbourhood factors were again insignificant in predicting the outcome in the full model. Aspiration for a VET qualification at age 15 years was significant in predicting a VET outcome as was aspiration for a university qualification for predicting a university outcome. Thus aspirations shaped at an early age help determine later educational outcomes. Achievement and attitude to school work at age 15 years also had significant positive effects on university outcomes but they had negative effects on VET outcomes.

Summary

This study has demonstrated the importance of including school fixed effects in models estimating the impact of neighbourhood factors on student outcomes. The school effects are fixed and capture all the differences, observed and unobserved, in school characteristics. As the characteristics of neighbourhoods are generally mirrored in the composition of schools, these are also captured by, and mediated through, the school fixed effects. Separating the neighbourhood effects from school effects is thus complicated and requires measures of both the school and neighbourhood contexts. School-level measures, including school leadership and teacher quality, providing information on the quality of the school could be useful in this respect, however, these are not always available or readily measurable.

The school fixed effects allow for the identification of neighbourhood effects from differences in outcomes between students at the same school who live in different neighbourhoods. This means that two students with similar individual and parental characteristics, attending the same school, but living in neighbourhoods with different levels of socioeconomic status, are likely to have similar educational outcomes.

The results suggest that inequalities in student outcomes may be reduced by a better allocation of resources to schools. The evidence for this is however indirect and does not provide guidance as to what aspects of school quality and resources are most likely to make a difference. Changing the ways principals and teachers are allocated to schools and ensuring a school's student intake is not disadvantaged through the selection practices of other schools could also help reduce disparity in student outcomes. ■

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The National Foundation Skills Strategy Project: Strategy priorities, professional practice workforce characteristics and standards

Louise Wignall,
Wignall Consulting Services

In November 2011, the COAG (Council of Australian Governments) Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) agreed to a National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults (the National Strategy). The 10-year strategy was built around a shared vision for a productive and inclusive Australia in which adults develop and maintain the foundation skills they need to participate confidently in the modern economy and meet the complex demands of modern life. The Strategy was officially launched on 28 September 2012 by the Hon Sharon Bird MP, the then Parliamentary Secretary for Higher Education and Skills. Within a year the former Australian Government's Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment was replaced by the COAG Industry and Skills Council and new policy settings began to be put in place in the Commonwealth and several State and Territory governments. In the midst of this change, the Foundation Skills Workforce Development (FSWD) Project was launched in 2013 as a joint initiative by Australian governments to support priority action areas from the National Strategy.

The project was conducted by TAFE SA and managed under the auspices of the South Australian Department of State Development. The project's scope broadened and work continued in 2014 under the rebranded National Foundation Skills Strategy Project (NFSSP) and concluded in June 2015 as funding for 2016 project activity was not successful.

The National Strategy: Priority Actions

Through the strategy Australian governments committed to a target that, by 2022, two thirds of working age Australians will have literacy and numeracy skills at Level 3 (referring to the levels in the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey undertaken in 2006 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics).

The strategy is structured to achieve this goal through four priority areas for action:

1. Raising awareness and commitment to action – building an understanding of foundation skills in the workplace and the community and removing the stigma associated with low adult foundation skills

2. Adult learners have high quality learning opportunities and outcomes – providing a variety of foundation skills development opportunities that can be tailored to individual needs

3. Strengthening foundation skills in the workplace – establishing strong and lasting partnerships between government, industry, employers and unions and providing foundation skills training that is responsive to employers and industry needs

4. Building the capacity of the education and training workforces to deliver foundation skills – building the skills of specialist language, literacy and numeracy practitioners, developing the workforce to enable the effective teaching of employability skills and supporting vocational trainers to better integrate foundation skills with vocational training.

The first three of these priority areas acknowledge the need, and potentially raise demand for services to address foundation skills within the adult population. The fourth priority area recognises that national foundation skills improvement will be dependent on the delivery capacity of the education and training workforce. A mobilised and effective foundation skills workforce is critical if government is to deliver on any promises and targets set in the Strategy. A key element of both the FSWD and NFSSP was the element exploring professional practice in foundation skills.

Research into professional practice in foundation skills

The research into Professional practice in foundation skills took place across the three-years of project activity and was designed to address the components of Priority Action 4 of the Strategy. This action focused on: building the capacity of the education and training workforces to deliver foundation skills; building the skills of specialist language, literacy and numeracy practitioners; developing the workforce to enable the effective teaching of employability skills, and supporting vocational trainers to better integrate foundation skills with vocational training.

> " A mobilised and effective foundation skills workforce is critical if government is to deliver on any promises and targets set in the Strategy. "

The Survey

An extensive NCVER survey 'Who is delivering foundation skills? – A survey of the LLN and education and training workforces' focused on the demographic characteristics of foundation skills practitioners and the context of their work (for example, location, organisation type, time in current role, and how long they have been in the foundation skills fields); the qualifications they hold and the skills and experience they bring to their work; the types of support they have received from employers to undertake professional development activities; and the skills they would like to develop further to help them in their jobs.

Close to 700 people responded to the survey; of those who responded, 78.8% (532) were female; 21.2% (143) were male with the majority of respondents aged between 45 and 64 years. They came from all states and territories although there were greater proportions from New South Wales and Victoria. Almost two-thirds (63.9%) resided in metropolitan areas with the remainder living in regional or remote areas. Around 41% worked for a TAFE; this was the most common workplace. The next most common workplaces comprised a range of private and community-based education and/or training organisations. The remainder worked in local government agencies, libraries, correctional services and secondary schools.

The respondents had considerable workforce experience and more than a third of them reported that they had been involved in one or more of the foundation skills fields – language, literacy, numeracy or employability skills – for more than 15 years. However, 35% were new to their current role, having only been in their job for two years or fewer. When asked if they were prepared to stay in the field, just over half of the respondents indicated that it was 'extremely likely' they would do so over the next five years. This data alone emphasizes the wealth of skills and

experience within the field that needs to be harnessed and passed on to new entrants.

Respondents held a wide variety of qualifications from education and training, social science and humanities areas. Those working in specialised areas of delivery often held multiple qualifications. Most respondents held a combination of higher education and VET credentials. The most common professional development activities undertaken by respondents in their current roles relate to reporting and systems compliance; using new resources; learning about new delivery modes/methods; digital literacy; and integrating language, literacy and numeracy into vocational contexts. Reporting and systems compliance aside, these content areas suggest respondents have a desire to ensure their skills are current, enabling them to keep abreast of new teaching methods, resources and technologies. Respondents indicated that formal qualifications and professional development are considered important in helping them fulfil their current roles, but it is the experience they have in working in the field that is regarded as being the most critical factor. Analysis from the survey helped to shape the development of the schema for the draft Framework.

Stories from the Field

'Stories from the Field' was a complementary activity seeking practitioners' personal perspectives about the range of credentials, experience and professional development that contribute to their professional identity. Stories from the Field was conceived as an activity that was primarily about foundation skills practitioners having the opportunity to talk with one another about their career trajectory, their current practices, ways of remaining current and future plans. The secondary purpose was to generate narrative content that could be used to illustrate or expand upon the quantitative data generated through the NCVER survey.

Practitioners taking part were invited to submit their stories to the project via email. This was voluntary and the purpose was not on generating numbers of stories. The two inter-related activities provided fresh national data about the diverse range of practitioners who are teaching or helping people develop their foundation skills, either in a paid or voluntary capacity across Australia. Intelligence collated through the research and consultation processes then informed

> **...these content areas suggest respondents have a desire to ensure their skills are current, enabling them to keep abreast of new teaching methods, resources and technologies.**

the development of the initial schema for the draft professional standards. A series of national focus groups was used to validate the findings of the qualitative and quantitative research activities and to test contentions about the readiness of the field for a set of professional standards and the shape they might take.

In total more than 800 people participated in the research. An independent evaluation by Phillips KPA reported that participants involved in both the research and consultation felt that the work would contribute lasting benefit to the research base underpinning the foundation skills workforce.

The draft Foundation Skills Professional Standards Framework

The purpose of the 'Foundation Skills Professional Standards Framework' is to provide a consistent, shared language for talking about roles and responsibilities in the foundation skills field, and to document the range of capabilities demonstrated by those working within the field.

The Framework can be used in a variety of ways, such as: a self-assessment tool for practitioners to identify and describe their current capability; to identify existing skill gaps and focus areas for professional development; to consistently describe expected practitioner capabilities for job descriptions or program requirements; as a mechanism for mapping outcomes from current and historic qualifications for the purposes of comparison with individual or employer requirements, and as the basis for describing and organising professional development options.

This draft Framework should be read in conjunction with the 'Professional Practice in Foundation Skills' final report (June 2015) which is available on the NFSS Project website at: www.statedevelopment.sa.gov.au/skills/national-foundation-skills-strategy-project

As the NFSS project ceased in June 2015, the draft Framework has not been subject to the validation processes that were originally planned. However, the draft may serve as a stimulus for further discussion around the capabilities of the range of practitioners responsible for addressing foundation skills. ∎

Call for papers:
Vocational Education Conference, 24 June 2016, University of Stirling

From Kevin Brosnan, University of Stirling, United Kingdom

On Friday 24 June, 2016 we are planning to host a small-scale, one-day conference here at the University of Stirling entitled 'Vocational Teacher Education in the 21 Century: Opportunities and Challenges'. The conference aims to examine a range of issues relating to the education of vocational education (CTE) teachers and trainers. The 'theme' of the conference is deliberately quite broad – any aspect of 'vocational teacher education' (initial education, ongoing professional development, relationships between professional standards and vocational teacher education, international comparisons, comparisons with school teacher education programmes, the impact of new technology on vocational teacher education) could provide the basis for a paper.

I appreciate that Stirling is a long way to come for a one-day conference but if any of your colleagues will be in the UK or Europe at that time then coming to the conference may be feasible. I would be very pleased to consider a paper proposal from academics in Australia relating to the initial and/or ongoing education of TAFE educators.

If you (or any of your colleagues) would like to contact me directly to discuss this opportunity further I would be happy to do so by email or telephone.

Regards,

Kevin Brosnan
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School of Social Sciences,
University of Stirling

What gaps need closing in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training provision?

John Guenther, Principal Research Leader, Remote Education Systems project, CRC-REP/Flinders University and Eva McRae Williams, Principal Research, Pathways project. CRC-REP/Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

Recently, the Prime Minister gave the annual Closing the Gap speech to parliament. The accompanying report (Turnbull, 2016) was a mix of optimism and despair as a few gaps closed and more widened. One that remained stubbornly open was the gap in employment. At one point, in relation to remote communities, the report notes: 'The difficulties in accessing training and the absence of strong labour markets make it difficult to secure continuous, paid employment'. (p. 32).

Over the past four years, we have been working on projects with the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, managed by Ninti One Limited. We have written widely on issues related to training delivery in remote communities and have come to some conclusions that challenge the assumptions of statements like the one given in the Closing The Gap report.

To begin with we soon discovered that the way we (who come from a western position) frame the notion of 'pathways' through training to employment, is built on a number of philosophical standpoints. The 'pathway' which is often portrayed as a linear, sequential and logical process to achieve status and income, is built on certain ontological, epistemological, axiological and cosmological assumptions, which when translated into remote environments, do not make sense (McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2012). Put another way, the metaphor which was designed to orient navigation to an endpoint of job, income, and status, depends on congruent philosophical standpoints; for example is my identity shaped primarily by my work role (such as I am a mechanic) or is it shaped by my position in kinship, my connection to country, law and 'dreaming'. This helped us understand why it was that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities seemingly jumped off the pathway that was made available to them.

Next we grappled with the idea that training in remote communities should somehow be connected to 'real jobs'. The theory, which is often articulated (as a form of Human Capital Theory), is that if training and employment were somehow connected then training would be successful. For example, if there were construction jobs available in a community, then training would facilitate transition into employment in that industry. The same could apply to mining, agriculture or manufacturing and a number of other industries in which few remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are employed. Our analysis of 2011 Census data revealed some interesting findings. We found that many jobs with low skill level requirements were taken by non-Indigenous people. Agricultural jobs for example, where more than 60 per cent of the workforce had no qualifications, had very low levels of local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander participation. Other industries with relatively high demand for qualifications such as health and education, had higher levels of local participation. We came to the conclusion that holding a Certificate III or having real jobs available did not facilitate employment (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014; McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2014). This was despite the presence of real jobs and a viable labour market, and where training was available.

So what would then make a difference? We were asked to examine several cases of effective collaboration among job service and training providers to see how cooperation between service providers would make a difference. It turned out that despite the collaborative effort and good will of many people, some of whom were experts in their field, highly collaborative service provision did not make much difference. In one of the cases we examined, attrition rates from enrolment to completion were as high as 100 per cent. That is, of more than 100 people identified as being suitable for training, with the prospect of jobs attached at the end, none completed the training. In another case touted as a success, where 15 Certificate I completers were proudly lined up in front of a camera with their hi-vis vests, the data suggested that these completers came from a pool of more than 800 eligible people (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2015).

In other data we have analysed, we noted a correlation between high levels of employment and training with higher levels of school engagement and academic outcomes (Guenther et al., 2014). All of this has led us back to a proposition we originally considered: effective training in remote communities will occur when the identities of trainees and employees is aligned to their local ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies and cosmologies. That is, training and employment ought to fit with what trainees value, think and believe are important; and fit with how they see themselves belonging to their community and country. This explains why those living in remote communities readily engage in ranger work, community services, the arts industry and even health and education. Training and employment in these industries fits with identities that are attuned to caring for country, family and maintaining language and cultural traditions (McRae-Williams, 2014).

> " The 'pathway' which is often portrayed as a linear, sequential and logical process to achieve status and income ... depends on congruent philosophical standpoints. "

We suspect that the question of high attrition rates is linked to this. To test this proposition, Ninti One was successful in obtaining an NCVER grant in 2015 to examine what it is about successful adult learning programs in very remote communities, that contributes to employability and results in higher retention rates. We will report on initial findings of this work at this year's No Frills conference, but the work we have already done suggests that the gaps we are trying to close are not 'real' to those living in remote communities. We suggest that the gaps, which first need closing are ontological, epistemological, axiological and cosmological gaps. They need to be carefully defined. Otherwise the assumptions driving current training

and employment policies will perpetuate the gaps rather than make a meaningful difference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities. ■

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Market rules? Where are women in skills provision in 21st century vocational education and training?

Linda Simon, WAVE National Convenor

In 1999, Butler and Ferrier wrote a landmark report for NCVER entitled 'Don't be too polite girls'. As part of this extensive literature research and review, the authors noted that women's participation rate in VET had improved, but that there were continuing problems, including women '... clustering in fields of study and at lower levels, less employer support for external training, under-representation and low completion rates in apprenticeships in non-traditional areas ...' (1999:vii). They also observed that the diminishing commitment to equity in a marketised VET system would present even greater challenges for many women and wrote that: 'The business of equity has never been central to the 'real' business of VET. There is little understanding of what equity means at a national level and there is a reluctance among policy makers to act on recommendations of equity-related research which call for structural or systemic changes that would see equity become a central organising principle within the VET system' (Butler and Ferrier, 1999).

Sixteen years have passed, with the VET system being subject to ongoing significant changes including the 2012 agreement on a new market-driven funding model for vocational education. 'Markets require a rationing of education, and the creation of hierarchies and mechanisms of competition' (Connell, 2013, p99). VET is now a highly complex public/private industry firmly located in a competitive market place. What has this meant for women and girls engaging in VET?

Drawing on research undertaken by Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) over this period, this paper considers equity and gender equity in C21 VET provision. This is in light of the G20 commitment by Australia (amongst other countries) to reduce the gap in workforce participation rates between men and women by 25% within the next 10 years. G20 leaders announced that by increasing female labour participation by 25% over the next 15 years, they would bring 100 million women into the workforce – thereby allowing the G20 countries to reach their goal to increase global economic growth by 2.1% by 2018.

Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) spokesperson Yolanda Beattie said when the G20 communique was released in 2014 that the G20 target could only be reached by addressing all the embedded workplace structures that disadvantage women. 'There is no silver bullet. It begins with a deep understanding of all of the systemic barriers to women's full participation in the workforce,' she noted. 'Every key decision maker needs to understand that the workforce is not a level playing field, and they need to understand why this is the case and then make a commitment to addressing every single element of women's disadvantage at work'. Beattie said there were three key 'levers to pull' in terms of lifting female workforce participation: social change, policy change and workplace change (Osborne-Crowley, 2014).

The marketised VET system in Australia has recently seen the demise of the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) and has little focus on equity and equality. This paper asks the critical questions: Have we moved on since 1999, or are women and girls facing the same challenges as then? Could the situation be even worse as a result of government commitment to markets in education?

In comparing the VET landscapes of 1999 and 2015, this paper focuses on equity policy and equity-related strategies, generally at a Federal Government level, and implications for women. Even by 2006, Butler and Ferrier noted that the position of women in VET was 'highly problematic', and provided the example of the NCVER round of funded research for VET, which stated: 'Research showed that women as a whole are doing well in VET and should no longer be seen as (an) equity group' (NCVER, 2005). In 2006 Damon Anderson's report on 'Trading places: the impact and outcomes of market reform in vocational education and training' was also published. It drew attention to the impact of the market on VET provision, characterised by the increased numbers of private RTOs, and the loss of 'support services and access-related initiatives'(Butler and Ferrier, 2006, p. 583).

This was also at a time when Dickie and Fitzgerald (2004) wrote of the training choices made by women and girls, the lower number of women in apprenticeships and traineeships and the barriers to career progression for female VET teachers. These same concerns were reiterated by WAVE researchers in 2011 in the report 'I can't think of any occupation that women can't do!', which focused on the concentration of women in feminised fields of training and work, their under-representation in growth industries, and their lack of parity in wages.

According to other researchers commenting on the effects of marketization and the cuts to TAFE funding, these changes have affected particular categories of students and educators, including young women. They have also resulted in funding cuts to female dominated industries as well as to access courses, also typically populated by women. (Seddon 2015, Mitchell 2012)

As part of its social inclusion agenda, the Rudd Government established the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) in 2009, to provide advice on how the VET sector could support learners who experienced disadvantage to achieve better outcomes. Women were one of the six identified groups. However NVEAC was abolished in further funding cuts and re-centralisation policies in 2014. These cuts to VET programs and overall funding have averaged out at 26% per contact hour since 2004, with the effects most significantly felt in costly courses and support services, including access courses. Unlike in 1999, few women's units and programs exist now in the VET sector.

NCVER data shows that the participation of women in VET remains at around 48%, the proportion of women commencing an apprenticeship or traineeship remains a steady 15%, female VET graduates (on average) earn less than males, and about a quarter of women are not employed after training.

It appeared to us in WAVE, that little has changed in the sixteen years since Butler and Ferrier wrote their report, and that many women and girls are still facing the same challenges today as women and girls did in 1999. Given the lack of any apparent equity focus in the marketised VET system of 2015, chances are that many women may be worse off. ■

The report can be found at www.wave.org.au

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Data Registration is now open for the AVETRA 19th Annual Conference!

The conference program will be held over two full days at the TAFE Northern Sydney Institute, Learning and Innovation Campus – St Leonards on Thursday 21 April and Friday 22 April 2016. The theme for 2016 is 'Putting VET research to work: collaboration, innovation, prosperity' and with a great line up of keynote speakers it is sure to be an unmissable event in the tertiary education calendar!

One of the current challenges for Federal Government is to ensure that research translates into successful social and economic outcomes for Australia. As the principal research body for the VET sector, AVETRA understands the significant value VET brings to Australia's 'Industry Innovation and Competitiveness agenda' through research into the issues affecting the sector and the innovative capacity of the workforce. AVETRA's 19th Annual conference places these issues at the centre of debate and calls for new ideas about how research and innovation in VET and enterprises can be better supported to bolster Australia's economic future.

On top of the presentations from many passionate VET researchers and workshops dealing with some of the 'difficult' research issues, you will hear from the following keynote speakers:

- **Professor Joe Lo Bianco** 'Collective writing of language and literacy policy, initiatives in peace building in SE Asia'
- **Associate Professor Ruth Schubert** 'Putting a stake in the ground: Quality Teaching in VET'
- **Chris Robinson** 'Quality in the VET sector'
- **Dr Damian Oliver** 'Employers understanding of the role of qualifications: the search for evidence'
- **Peter Noonan** 'Investment in VET – the past, the present and the future'

We look forward to seeing you there!

Date: 21 and 22 April 2016

Location: TAFE Northern Sydney Institute, Learning and Innovation Campus St Leonards

If you have any queries please contact the AVETRA 2016 Conference Secretariat:

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Data on total VET activity opens up a 'black box'

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What is total VET activity?

The ability to understand the extent and diversity of the vocational education and training (VET) market in Australia is now beginning to be realised with the release of total VET activity (TVA). In 2015 the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) published Total VET students and courses 2014 as part of the National VET Provider Collection. For the first time data was reported for all accredited training delivered in 2014 by Australian providers, including TAFEs, private providers, the adult and community education sector, enterprises, schools and universities. The impetus for this came from the decision of the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) then Standing Council on Tertiary Education Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) who agreed, in November 2012, to mandatory reporting of nationally recognised training activity from 2014.

Why do we want it?

Having data that includes privately-funded training provision as well as public funding has been talked about for years but, to some extent, has been a 'black box'. In particular, the goals of market expansion that were incorporated into the National Goals for Vocational Education and Training in 1992 meant that private providers began to play a much bigger role (Bowman & McKenna 2016) in the training and skilling arena.

Until TVA, little was known about privately-funded training in Australia including the extent of the provider market and number of students that undertook training, and enrolments in qualifications. Prior to TVA, there had been some research in the past including Harris, Simons and McCarthy in 2006 who examined, by survey sample, the activities of private training providers in Australia. Their survey of 330 private providers found a great deal of diversity but highlighted that the majority of survey participants only employed small numbers of staff. Interestingly, as part of their research, Harris et al estimated the contribution of private VET providers to the overall provision of VET in Australia. Their estimate in 2003 was that there were in the vicinity of 2.2 million students enrolled in private registered training organisations (RTOs), which, with the benefit of hindsight, was probably not a bad estimate.

However, Harris et al.'s work was based on estimates and they realised that there were many benefits of knowing more about the private training market given its size and the potential scope of delivery of training. The current environment of VET, which includes a focus on student entitlement models and a more competitive training landscape, has made it even more important for us to know about all VET activity. Ultimately, knowledge of the entire VET provision landscape provides policy makers, training providers and industry players with information to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the system and provide relevant and required training that addresses student and labour market needs.

What do the numbers show?

In the future, TVA will offer vast opportunities for analyses and reporting, which will result in a more holistic picture of VET in Australia. However, at the moment we have the first transitional year of data, which in itself offers significant opportunities to explore the extent and distribution of TVA. The initial collection of TVA shows that approximately 3.9 million students undertook some form of accredited VET in 2014 (including 23.3% of the 15-64 year old population). Of these 3.9 million, about 2.3 million students (or 57.6% of all) were enrolled with private training providers. This compares to about 1.1 million students at TAFE (or 27.3% of all). The remaining students, just over 0.5 million, were undertaking training through schools, community education providers, universities and enterprise providers (Figure 1).

In addition, in 2014 there were 4,601 distinct training providers. Of these, 2,865 were private training providers (62.3% of all providers) and 57 were TAFE institutes (Figure 2).

TVA data also provided the evidence that 59.4% of the funding for subject enrolments was provided through state and Commonwealth government funding mechanisms, with a further 35.0% derived from domestic fee-for-service and 5.6% from international fee-for-service.

Where to now?

With further years of TVA data collection, opportunities will emerge for a more comprehensive understanding of national
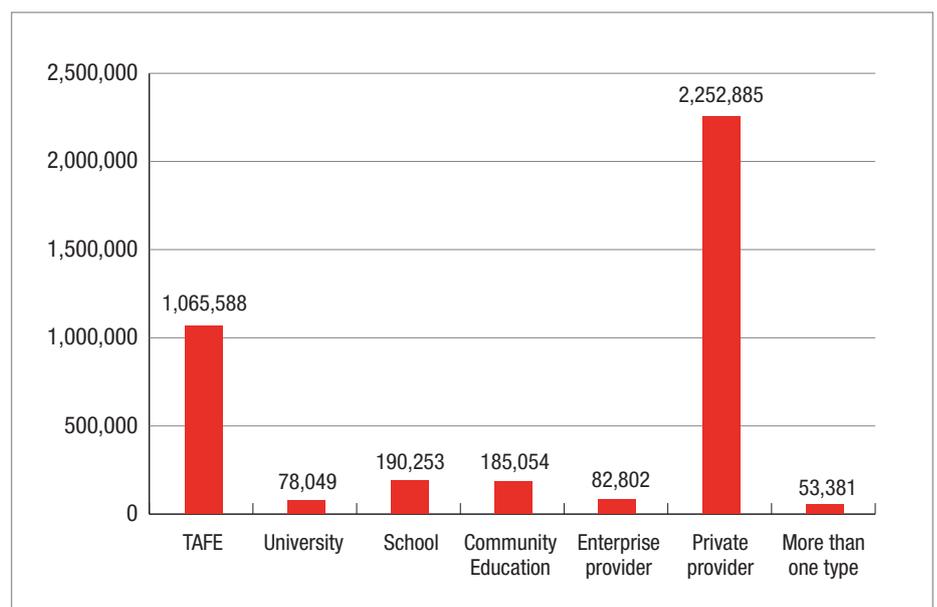

Figure 1: Number of students by provider type

Source: NCVER 2015, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: Total VET students and courses 2014*, NCVER, Adelaide.
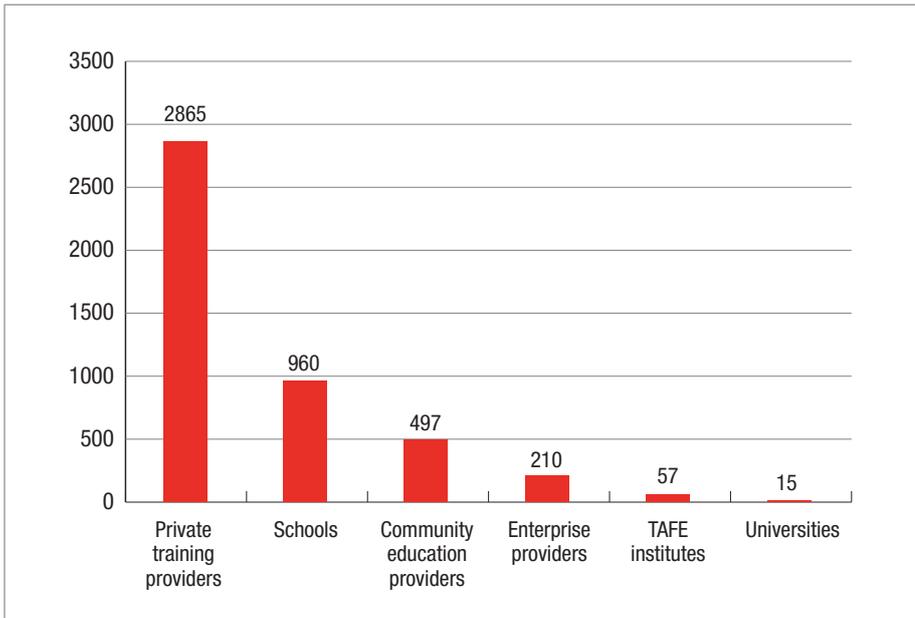
Figure 2: Number of providers delivering accredited training

Source: NCVER 2015, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: Total VET students and courses 2014*, NCVER, Adelaide.

VET and enable the analysis of trends over time to be examined.

In addition, the introduction of the Unique Student Identifier (USI) - a unique number allocated to students that is used for all their nationally recognised training - enables the tracking of individual students as they progress through training. Over time, this will provide a more in-depth knowledge of student training behaviours and outcomes including the enduring issue of being able to accurately measure completion rates. These initiatives will be complemented by the expanded Student Outcomes Survey which will provide information on training outcomes across all training provision, not only that which has government funding.

To ensure the distribution of TVA data collections and analysis occurs as widely as possible, NCVER is constantly looking at more innovative ways to present data. The goal is to provide a greater level of accessibility to audiences with diverse needs, and deliver benefit to all stakeholders in the system. All of these developments will provide a much more complete picture of vocational education and training in Australia, and more evidence for decision making than

has been previously available. This in turn will deliver significant benefits to a diverse range of VET stakeholders including governments, industry, individual employers, unions, training providers, students and the ultimate beneficiary – the Australian public. ■

References:

Bowman, K & McKenna, S 2016 *The development of Australia's national training system: a dynamic tension between consistency and flexibility*, NCVER, Adelaide.

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NCVER 2015a T*otal VET activity by equity groups: data visualisation*, NCVER, Adelaide.

More information on total VET activity is available from:
www.ncver.edu.au/totalvetactivity.html

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