



Editor: Erica Smith

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Message from AVETRA President:

It is with great pleasure that the VET *Research Today* concept has re-emerged as part of AVETRA's services to members and the VET sector generally. *Research Today* will focus on researching, researchers and the impact of research and will be published twice a year.

Early in the life of AVETRA, a previous version of *Research Today* provided an opportunity to develop an understanding of VET research and to champion this relatively new area of research. While the times and the status of VET research have changed, it is still important to maintain the presence and profile of VET research, and we are very fortunate in this country in having a critical mass of researchers from which Australia has developed a comprehensive and high quality consolidated collection of research.

The challenges for VET research continue and this years developments such as the Review of the NCVET research contracts, the shift of VET policy operations into the federal Department of Education Science and Technology and the proposals for a research quality framework in universities. The need to stay connected and develop an understanding of the latest shifts in VET and VET research is very important.

VET research is ultimately about people who live and breathe VET research and who are committed and passionate about their work. This publication gives an opportunity for members to know a bit more about other VET researchers and to also hear about the process of VET research as an important discipline and study. The interview with Roger Harris, who is a well-known and respected researcher, will give us some important insights. David Collins from the NSW government is also interviewed on the perplexing question of integrating policy and research. An article summarising journal editors' reactions to the articles that are submitted to them will be of value to all those researchers who carry out the important work of adding to the body of knowledge by publishing in peer-reviewed journals.

I commend this edition to all members and readers and thank Erica Smith for putting together this new reborn version of AVETRA's *Research Today*.

Peter Kell
President AVETRA

Message from 'Research Today' editor

We welcome contributions from members of AVETRA to 'Research Today'. Contributions should preferably be 500 words or less and should focus on VET researchers, researching and the impact of research. Please send your contribution to me at esmith@csu.edu.au, or if you wish you may phone first to discuss your idea, on 02-6933 2087.

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▲ The Research Quality Framework and VET Research

The government's proposed Research Quality Framework has been discussed at length in universities and the media. The final form of the RQF has been decided, and states that research outputs of groups of researchers will be assessed for quality and impact. The criteria for each of these measures are of course hotly disputed. The UK experience with its Research Assessment Exercise is frequently cited although it is not necessarily the case that our RQF will have similar effects to the RAE. Some universities have already reacted to the proposed RQF by consolidating VET research groups into larger research centres or by publishing lists of 'quality' journals that its staff must aim to publish in. Other universities are biding their time until the final form of the RQF is known. Erica Smith is leading a working party of the AVETRA executive to monitor and plan for the effects of the RQF on the national VET research effort, and all members of AVETRA are invited to volunteer for this working party by contacting Erica at esmith@csu.edu.au

▲ AVETRA paper of the year-2006

Roger Harris and Linda Rainey, 'Crazy paving? Learning pathways between and within VET and higher education'

Each year a paper at the annual AVETRA conference is selected by a panel as Paper of the Year.

Roger Harris the lead author (the winner of the inaugural AVETRA Ray Barker Award for Distinguished Service to VET research) was interviewed for 'Research Today' about the paper. His comments will be helpful for all those who want to learn the knack of writing good conference papers.

Please describe briefly the research on which the paper was based, and any especial challenges in the research.

Our paper was based on an NCVET project. We wanted to interrogate the notion of "pathway" in the light of government policies to promote easy and seamless transitions within and between educational sectors. It was a follow-on from an earlier project, completed a year earlier, called *Student Traffic*, which hinted at lots of student movement but couldn't really – because of the questionnaire methodology – tell us much about the personal stories of those who moved. So in the second project, we interviewed 49 students who had experienced both the VET and HE sectors, and extensively analysed the contextual literature on pathway policy and career development.

The key challenges were identifying those who could be included, making sense of national statistics obtained from NCVET and DEST on student characteristics over the years on those who had moved between sectors, and using this information to come up with some common patterns of movement!

Was the conference paper based on the whole project or just part of it? If the latter, how did you decide which part?

Our paper for AVETRA was based on a part of this project – on the patterns of movement. We judged that this would be the most interesting for a conference audience, being a 'live' presentation, and also it was the most creative part of our research – our special contribution to knowledge, if you like.

How did you structure the conference paper, considering the length restrictions? What did you decide to emphasise and why? Was there one key message of your paper?

It means that we have to be very succinct and concise, and to bite off only what we can chew within the time and space permitted. So we chose the theme of 'crazy paving' with a question mark to focus on – whether there were any discernable patterns and what they were – we came up, somewhat tentatively, with five main types of student movement, but we couldn't of course go into much depth on each of them. We hoped an understanding of the types might help institutional administrators and policy-makers with insights into how best to position relationships between sectors and to implement policies and services that help learners navigate through education systems that are quite different in philosophy and pedagogy.

How did you split the writing task between the authors? Did it present any challenges?

We had our draft report to start from. One author developed a draft of the paper, then the other with fresh eyes made a second version from that first draft. Then we negotiated on any points that needed discussion between us.

How many hours' work was involved in writing the paper?

I don't know. So much work had already gone into the report; it is too difficult to estimate the number of hours in preparing the paper itself.

What is the value of producing a conference paper as compared with a journal article?

I think one can get live and immediate audience reaction/feedback; and, more practically, it helps to justify getting leave or finance to attend a conference!

What do you think about your paper led to the award of the prize?

I think it was a well-balanced paper of considerable topical interest. I also think that it was based on solid evidence - qualitative data that enabled a typology of student movement to be developed. From this typology, we were able to state where further research would be helpful and what some implications might be for institutional planners and policy-makers. The reviewers told us what they believed were the positive features of the paper. They wrote that it made a major contribution to the knowledge associated with the movement of students across sectoral boundaries. They also said they were impressed by the creative approach of using graphical representations as well as qualitative interview data to illustrate the movement of students.

Have you got any advice for other researchers writing conference papers?

I feel strongly that there is one key piece of advice. Having a draft report to start with is handy in one respect but can be a *big trap* in another. It does give you a starting point so that you can be concise and balanced because you know what the larger piece of work looks like as a whole. But you have to be very careful in cutting it down so that the paper is seen by fresh eyes or ears *to stand alone as a paper*, not as a *segment of a larger report*. I've seen too many of the latter – assumptions can be made, vital bits of information can be left out, the purpose of *the paper* is not stated, the paper can lack balance, all because the writers are either so familiar with the report and read things into the short paper imagining they are present or don't take enough care over the abbreviating. It's quite a challenge!

There is a lot of other advice that could be given:

- Consider the themes and sub-themes of the conference, and reflect on how your ideas for a paper will connect with these.
- Start early, so that you leave yourself enough time to be able to go over it several times, preferably leaving space between versions so as to be able to read it with a 'fresh' perspective. It will take a few iterations. Don't think it is a one-off exercise.
- Keep the theme consistent throughout.
- Base your paper on research (provided that the conference is a research conference), locate your research, however briefly given space restrictions, in the context of the literature, and try to lift out of the detail of the data at the end to come up with a new idea, model, framework or something like that. It helps to give your paper some 'bite'.

▲ Interview with an 'end user' of research: David Collins, NSW Department of Education and Training

Can you tell me your current role and any other relevant roles you have had over the past decade or so?

As General Manager State Training Services for the NSW Department of Education and Training I am responsible for industry engagement, regulation of training providers and apprenticeships and traineeships, funding of strategic training initiatives and related policy development.

Over the past two decades I have held a variety of training policy and program positions at a state and national level. I am currently also responsible for the NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training, with which I have worked for the past eight years. BVET is a significant source of VET research in NSW.

In this role, or these roles, in what ways have you been involved in or with VET research?

Part of BVET's charter is to foster research in vocational education and training. The Board has taken a broad view of this, focusing on the VET in a wide economic and social context. As such, over time it has commissioned significant research into critical issues such as the role of VET in the changing world of work; the capacity of VET to drive innovation within industry; and the implications of sustainability for vocational education and training.

Investigation of these big questions has been supported by research and demonstration activities that target changes in the way training organisations engage with industry and their communities. These projects have aimed to improve outcomes for businesses, regions, communities and individuals.

In previous years I have been involved with commissioning national research through NCVET as a member of the National Research and Evaluation Committee.

What two or three pieces of VET research have made the most impact on you, and why?

Without a doubt, *Beyond Flexibility*, BVET funded research by ACIRRT at Sydney University (now the Workplace Research Centre) has been the most influential. BVET commissioned this research at a time when it was clear that all the assumptions underpinning our national system of VET were coming into question. The way work was organised was being influenced by economic, social and technological changes. These changes were seen to have major implications for the way in which we

organised and funded vocational education and training. The research by ACIRRT analysed the challenges of the changing nature of work and proposed responses, which have had a major impact on policy both in NSW and nationally. Its most fundamental conclusion is that training on its own cannot respond to the skills challenges facing us.

Beyond Flexibility established the concept of the skills ecosystem - the concentration of skills and knowledge in a region or industry - as an alternative to our current thinking on how skills should be developed and deployed. In a skill ecosystem inter-firm relationships, business strategy, technology, job design and work organisation interact with training provision and skills development to improve economic performance and employment outcomes.

Since 2003 BVET and the Australian Government have jointly funded a national project that established a number of skill ecosystem pilot projects that examined, among other things, the role training organisations can play in influencing the demand for skills.

Beyond Flexibility continues to influence my work within the NSW training system and with the Board of Vocational Education and Training. It also has a continuing impact on national debate about future directions for VET.

What types of research are most useful to policy makers?

Research that uses soundly investigated empirical material to raise new questions about key policy issues. We need researchers to apply critical thought, to push the bounds of what is possible and encourage us to consider positive policy and program responses.

Research that provides an international perspective on local issues can be useful. It is also valuable to integrate qualitative and quantitative research - underpinning personal perspectives with reliable information.

In what ways could researchers better disseminate their ideas to policy makers?

Finding time to read research reports is always going to be a challenge. Researchers need to find a way to cut through to their audience, to get their attention. Concise conclusions with headline facts and figures help.

The key is probably to demonstrate the relevance of the research. This might be achieved by placing the findings in context, such as partnering with industry to present research findings in a seminar.

What are some qualities of successful researchers who make an impact on policy or practice?

They understand the policy environment. They have the ability to provide a high-level, critical overview of an area of national policy and practice - a bird's eye

view that can be difficult to attain when you're very close to policy making. They can take the headline facts and figures and build an argument that policy makers can then use.

Researchers need to take policy makers seriously and recognise that despite the constraints within which policy maker's work, they have the capacity to make a difference.

If you personally had money to fund four research projects in VET (not necessarily connected with your own department's current priorities), which topics would you like researched?

- A definitive 'return on investment' piece that would win the argument with government and industry over the impact of vocational education and training
- The value of qualifications - what do they really signify to employers and individuals?
- A rich longitudinal survey of VET graduates - how has their VET influenced their achievement over time?
- It must be time to revisit the European VET systems to see what more we can learn from them.

▲ How can you get your work published?

Research only becomes useful when it is in the public domain, and while there are many avenues for dissemination, publishing in a peer-reviewed journal is a major way of reaching informed audiences, especially overseas. With this in mind, I interviewed five editors of journals that regularly publish articles related to VET about the process by which they select articles for inclusion in their journals. One of the interviewees is Andy Smith, editor of AVETRA's own journal, the *International Journal of Training Research*. The table on the next three pages summarises the responses of the journal editors. As you will see, journal editors and kindly folk who really try hard to assist authors to produce high quality work and achieve success in publication.

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Journal editors' responses to questions about publishing in their journals

	David Boud Studies in Continuing Education	Geoffrey Elliot Research in Post- Compulsory Education	Jocelyn Robson Journal of Vocational Education & Training	Andy Smith International Journal of Training Research	Jennifer Sumsion Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education (co- editor)
<i>In general, do you find it easy or difficult to find sufficient high quality articles to fill your journal?</i>	There are never enough really high quality papers. While we normally have no difficulty filling the journal with those of sufficiently high quality, we are always seeking the really excellent.	Somewhere in between, the picture is variable. Sometimes good ideas can be poorly presented; then editors and referees have to make fine judgements about whether the effort required in bringing a paper to an acceptable standard is worthwhile. My own approach is to be as encouraging as possible, and particularly to contributions from parts of the world under-represented in the journal.	At the moment, it is difficult and we are behind publication schedule.	It is quite hard to find good articles. VET researchers seem to move onto more projects without publishing the results of research already undertaken. They also tend to publish in international journals rather than Australian ones.	It varies - sometimes we get a rush of good articles interspersed with droughts. Overall, we've managed a good balance in that we are happy with the steadily increasing quality of the journal but the publication lag between acceptance of an article and publication is less than a year. We're moving to 4 issues per year in 2007 (up from 3) and are wondering what the impact of that will be. Hopefully, we won't need to lower our standards.
<i>Approximately what proportion of submitted articles are accepted without revision, and with revision?</i>	It varies considerably as we have times when we get flurries of papers totally unsuitable for the journal. This can give journals unrealistically high formal rejection rates. However, on the more realistic measure of those we put through refereeing, approx 75% ultimately get accepted in some form. It is rare that any paper is accepted without revision.	About 50/50. Some revisions are very minor though.	Hardly any accepted without revisions; between 40-50% accepted with revisions.	The IJTR acceptance rate without revision is about 10%.	Without revision: Miniscule - maybe 5%. With revision - 15% approx . Our acceptance rate is only about 20%.
<i>Do you reject any articles without even sending them to reviewers? If so, on what basis?</i>	This is quite common and occurs relatively quickly (within a few weeks). The main reasons are that the author does not understand the kinds of material the journal publishes, that it is not written with an international audience in mind, or that it is not a paper written for a scholarly refereed journal. Referees put in a lot of time and effort and I do not want to burden them with papers that do not meet the basic requirements at the start.	Yes. If a paper is outside the remit of the journal mainly. Sometimes I get incoherent stuff, which I prefer not to send on to referees when I know it will be rejected outright. The editor is there to use his/her judgment.	Yes. This happens if the written English is below publishable standard or if the topic is not relevant to our readership.	Only very occasionally. I reject if they are clearly not suited to the journal in terms of content or are very bad. I usually want to use reviewers to give comments to authors.	Yes - heaps! Probably 50%. We cull fairly severely because we sometimes find it hard to get reviewers who are able to do a thorough job and we are very conscious of not wanting to abuse their generosity in giving up their time to review for us. If we feel that the paper has some potential to eventually make it through the review process, we will quite often give feedback to prospective authors as an editorial team and invite them to revise and resubmit before we send it for review.

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<i>What are the most common types of alterations that reviewers request?</i>	Clarification of the argument, strengthening of justification of claims made, methodological explicitness, inclusion of reference to relevant works in the area, clarity of expression. In addition, abstracts are often not well written and references are frequently not cited correctly.	Most common are: theory gaps; references missing; typos; some refocusing needed; shorten the length.	All kinds of amendments are requested, e.g. specific key texts/literature that has not been referred to, lack of information given about methodology, presentation, quality of argument, etc.	Usually better explanations of methodology and the drawing of unsubstantiated generalisations from data. Also the usual expression and grammar.	(No particular order): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ explanation of methods used ○ internal consistency of argument ○ avoid overstating claimed conclusions ○ clarification of context ○ suggestions re literature that authors may have overlooked
<i>What sort of responses do you get from authors about the comments they receive from reviewers via you?</i>	They tend to be very appreciative. Sometimes the most positive comments come from those who have been given a hard time from referees as a critical review can often lead to the most learning. Worryingly, for some it is apparent that no one has read their work closely before.	By and large very positive.	Positive on the whole. The vast majority want to respond to the comments and do so quickly. Sometimes they don't come back, but not often.	Nearly always happy to revise to meet the reviewers' comments – very few dispute what reviewers say as they want to get published!	If authors comment (which is relatively rare) they are nearly always grateful for the feedback, even though they may not agree with all of it.
<i>What do you think the benefits of peer review are?</i>	The quality of all papers improves and for many papers this is a substantial improvement.	It is a quality enhancement process – despite its faults and obvious dangers, I know of no other method that could work as well.	Variable; if it is reviewed by someone close to the specific field I think it is valuable but not always possible to provide this. But most of our reviewers are encouraging & constructive and that's a key benefit. A blind process enables strong critiques to be made sometimes and that is important, so long as it is not abused.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ quality assurance ○ increase reputation of journal ○ good quality feedback for authors. 	It's a way of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ drawing on a wide range of expertise and viewpoints ○ supporting authors ○ alerting reviewers to new ideas ○ 'educating' the scholarly field / discipline (i.e. enhancing its research capacity) generally.
<i>What advice would you give to authors so that their articles are more likely to be accepted with minimal alterations?</i>	Get colleagues experienced in writing papers to give it a careful read. Failing that, get anyone you can to critically read it before submission. But don't hold back on submitting a paper. The worst thing that will happen is that you will find out something useful for when you come to write again!	Target the journal carefully. Write well and get people not in academe to read it for coherence. Avoid name dropping and over-theorising; be clear about the limitations - this last is a major indicator of quality in my book.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Look at previous issues of the journal. ○ Show it to a colleague first. ○ Follow contributors' guidance slavishly. ○ Show how your local experience, research etc connects with an international readership. ○ Be clear in intro what you are setting out to do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ always stick to journal submission guidelines ○ make articles research based as IJTR is a research journal ○ good sections on methodology ○ make sure conclusions are supported by 	Think carefully about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ what you want to say, why you think it would be of interest to an international readership, and what it actually adds to the existing literature ○ whether you've really engaged with the existing literature - are you furthering the conversation or re-inventing the wheel? ○ whether your argument is

	David Boud Studies in Continuing Education	Geoffrey Elliot Research in Post- Compulsory Education	Jocelyn Robson Journal of Vocational Education & Training	Andy Smith International Journal of Training Research	Jennifer Sumsion Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education (co- editor)
			and then do that.	data ○ write well.	internally consistent ○ does your data allow you to make the claims you have.
<i>What is the most satisfying thing about being a journal editor, and the least satisfying thing?</i>	Most satisfying: ○ helping new writers find an outlet for their work and seeing new ideas emerging. Least satisfying: ○ reading submissions from people who have never read the journal, have not followed the guidelines for formatting and referencing, and have nothing interesting to say.	○ seeing the issue come together, especially when a lot of work has been involved from referees and editor. Least satisfying: ○ relentless deadlines and finding time to give to the job.	Most satisfying: ○ feeling that I can help bring good work to public notice. ○ Implementing what I hope is a fair and constructive process which authors can then learn from. Least satisfying: ○ feeling burdened with record keeping and admin, pressure about deadlines.	Most satisfying: ○ contributing to the discipline and research. Least satisfying: ○ relentless pressure getting the journals through production.	Most satisfying: ○ seeing the quality of the journal improve and assisting people (via the review process) to polish their work. ○ the learning experience / professional development involved in working with a diverse team of co-editors; the demystification of the review process and journal operations generally. ○ seeing the diversity of people's interests. ○ broadening contacts / networks through communication with authors and reviewers Least satisfying: ○ reading a steady stream of mediocre submissions that appear to be driven more by the pressure to publish than by a sense of having something interesting and valuable to convey to the wider world.
<i>What sort of articles are you looking for at the moment?</i>	We currently have a good supply, but we always want really good ones submitted. Critical reviews of common practices are always welcome.	Work-based learning, widening participation, informal learning, community-based learning, post compulsory education policy.	Good quality articles within the field of VET, no specific topics but it needs to have international relevance and that relevance needs to be clear.	Anything on VET – preferably with an international dimension.	Anything that addresses important issues, preferably from a reasonably critical perspective (although that's not essential). APJTE publishes an eclectic mix of articles in terms of theoretical / methodological underpinnings. We try to be as genuinely open to all types of work as possible - as long as it is well done.



AVETRA 2007

10th Annual Conference

11 - 13 April 2007

Victoria University Footscray Park, Melbourne, Victoria

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Conference

The 10th AVETRA Conference is expected to attract some 250 participants, from the vocational education research sector – with practitioners and researchers presenting their work. In a context in which VET is being challenged to simultaneously meet the needs of the present and the future while continuing to perform roles that it has successfully fulfilled for many years, this conference seeks to explore what is being required of VET: what tensions exist between the various demands being placed on the sector, and how can these tensions be addressed?

Four Keynote Speakers, some 80 refereed papers, a series of poster presentations, half-day workshops, and a series of social networking events will be presented over 3 days.

Registration

Registration details will be available on the AVETRA web site at the end of January 2007 – including an online registration system.

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Keynote Speakers

- **W. Norton Grubb** holds the David Gardner Chair in Higher Education Policy, Organisation, Measurement and Evaluation (POME) at the University of California, Berkeley, USA
- **Philipp Gonon** is Professor for VET and teacher training at the University of Zurich, Switzerland

AVETRA 2007 Conference Secretariat

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