

# Research Today

RESEARCHERS' MAGAZINE FROM THE AUSTRALIAN VET RESEARCH ASSOCIATION



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## FROM THE PRESIDENT

### Message from the AVETRA President

Writing for different audiences is quite a difficult skill. But it is one that is essential for researchers as they strive to make an impact in different communities. The 'secrets' of how to address groups of readers with quite varied levels of understanding and interests can seem to be hard to uncover. We are fortunate, in Lyn Yates's article in this edition of 'Research Today', to have a contribution from an acknowledged expert in this area. I commend this article to all researchers.

Also in this edition we have our annual round-up of VET research theses and masters projects from 2008. There are some great studies reported here, and you are invited to contact the authors for more details.

The second Vocational Education and Training (VET) Researcher of the Year Award was posthumously awarded to Professor Chris Selby Smith at the Australian Training Awards on 19 November 2009. Chris's wife, Joy Selby Smith, accepted the award on his behalf. Dr Tom Karmel, Managing Director of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) said Chris was a major contributor to research and of high standing. "He was recognised as a leading researcher in many areas including user choice, cost of training, impact of research and funding for students with a disability," Dr Karmel said. He went on to say "Chris embodied everything that the VET Researcher of the Year Award stands for. His legacy will encourage others to strive for excellence in the study of VET."

Throughout his career, Chris worked for many research organisations. He had a successful career in the Australian Public Service from 1975 to 1988, and co-founded the Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) at Monash University in 1992. Chris's long publication record included both a large body of scholarly works and writing intended for policy makers. As AVETRA members know, Chris was well respected and well liked among the whole VET research community.

AVETRA members are reminded of the 2010 annual conference in April at Surfers Paradise. More details and a web link can be found on the back page of this edition. I would like to thank organisers and attendees for another great OctoberVET year, with eight events around Australia over a period of three weeks. Please consider mounting an event in your locality next year.

*Erica Smith*  
President, AVETRA

### Contributions to Research Today

We welcome contributions from members of AVETRA to 'Research Today'. Contributions should preferably be 500 words or fewer, and should focus on VET researchers, researching and the impact of research. Please send your contribution to me at [e.smith@ballarat.edu.au](mailto:e.smith@ballarat.edu.au) or you may phone first to discuss your idea, on 03-5327 9665.

**Erratum:** In the May 2009 edition, in the article 'How to get research funding - a funding agency perspective', by Jo Hargreaves and Bridget Wibrow from the NCVER, two lines were repeated, making the sense confused. Here is the correct paragraph:

"Another commonly cited weakness identified is an unsuitable methodology or one that is not clearly defined. Demonstrating that the methodology is suitable to answer the research questions posed and that it follows sound statistical or research practice, and is transparent, is essential for a good proposal. NCVER expects that the conclusion from your research will be based on empirical evidence rather than opinion or advocacy."

We apologise to readers and to the authors for this error.

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## Writing About Research - Some Pitfalls.

**Professor Lyn Yates, Pro Vice Chancellor  
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Why do people who are already highly experienced teachers, trainers, bureaucrats, managers and communicators come to university and find themselves puzzling over what kind of writing makes a good thesis? Why do new academics often struggle with getting their articles published, or having their grant applications succeed? Why do lecturers who have actually cracked the code for good academic writing find that that this isn't exactly what schools and state departments are looking for? And why are academics frustrated by journalists' disdain for the subtleties about their findings that they want to convey?

One of the things that led me to write a book called *What does good education research look like?* was a growing interest in two different but related problems: 'why does it seem so hard?' and 'why is there so much criticism of education research?' There are of course a lot of political and value disputes in the field (this is a democracy and we don't all agree about what we value in education or out of education). And not everyone does do good research. But another source of our problems is the sheer diversity of the contexts we are expected to work in, and the different criteria people have in those different places for what is good and what looks appropriate.

To take some examples. In academic research we tend to value precision, and part of this is being careful: qualifying the limitations of what you show; being specific about where it applies and where it doesn't, and so on. We value your ability to display that you know your specialist field, for example by using the specialist terms that have developed in it. And we want to hear in some detail about your research design and methods, to decide whether we should trust it or not. Because a thesis is also a pinnacle in an academic qualification hierarchy, readers also expect hyper-correctness of grammar, formal language. The readers are other academics, and they are reading to see if you know what doing 'proper' research is. The findings matter, but the description of how you got to the findings matters equally. And you need to be up to date. It is easy to criticize 'academic' language, but it arose for a purpose – to see whether you know a field, whether you are an 'educated person', whether you can be trusted as a serious researcher.

Now consider what the press and media they look for in research. They want research to be definite and, preferably, controversial. They want researchers they can rely on to give them a quote. They do want to be able to refer to them as an expert, but this need not mean a person that other

researchers in that field would consider to be an expert, it normally just means having a job in a university or authority, or having published a book.

In the press or the media, specialist language and long sentences need to be avoided. Very little interest is shown in the research design and rigour that produced the results – what matters is the conclusion. They don't care about acknowledging your co-researchers, or your funders. Here the key questions will be 'can you tell us simply and clearly what you found and why it matters and why it is interesting?'

And what about consultancies and commissioned research? Whether it is a school or an authority of some kind, what the funders are paying for here are *answers* that can be put into *action*, and answers that at worst do not embarrass the commissioning authority and at best reinforce the message that it is doing a good job. Good researchers here are ones that are reliable, that deliver on time and in the format required. Having a product that meets the specified deliverables is important (or more important). Here it is likely to be the commissioning body which decides in advance what kinds of methods count as good research, so too bad if you believe in qualitative research and that is not what the client is looking for.

I've tried to write about these often subtle differences of expectations in my book, trying to spell out in a lot more detail than here just what does make a difference in winning a grant, or writing a thesis or a journal article or grant application, or selling your research to employers or to the public and press.

In some respects this is about writing and genre – it is possible to point to writing elements that help your work look good or inadequate. But I am more of a sociologist than an expert on writing, and what I think we need to be recognizing are the contexts and situations in which we work. For any situation where you are writing about research, the key questions for me are these:

- Who will be the readers and judges of the work?
- What expectations and networks do they bring to the task?
- What are their explicit and also implicit criteria for good research?

This doesn't mean simply kow-towing to every going opinion. I think good research (and researchers) should have integrity and should make themselves heard. Not everyone will agree with you, and you can set out to persuade others that the criteria they are bringing to judging good research need to change. But you will get further if you begin by knowing, thinking about and trying to connect with the particular situation you are writing for.

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## VET Research Theses 2008

### ▲ **Adult learning and career transitions: Development of a lifelong learning model for engagement, recognition and transitions**

Roslyn Cameron (PhD)  
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Recognition of prior learning (RPL) was introduced into Australia as part of a national framework for education, training and qualifications. A tenet of RPL is to act as a mechanism of social inclusion for those groups traditionally marginalised and disenfranchised from formal post compulsory education and training. The purpose of this research was to investigate why RPL has failed to act as a mechanism for social inclusion for those considered disadvantaged within the labour market and/or disengaged from formal learning.

The research was a qualitative exploratory study that utilised a Sequential Mixed Model research design (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003). The design incorporated two phases and involved mixed methods of data collection in both phases. Phase I of the study explored the gap between the rhetoric and promise of RPL and its reality through a quantitative Learning Survey of approximately 250 Labour Market Program (LMP) participants. This was followed by a qualitative focus group of representatives from the organisations funded to conduct the LMPs. Phase II developed a model to assist those adults disadvantaged within the labour market. The model was tested in the field and evaluated through formative evaluation research involving a combination of mixed methods.

A conceptual framework was developed that included a continuum of models of RPL, a hierarchy of recognition and a model for adults experiencing career and learning transitions. The research study has significance for the areas of access, participation and social inclusion, skill recognition systems, transitional labour market policy frameworks and pedagogies for lifelong learning. The research also contributes at a methodological level, having utilised a mixed method typology.

### ▲ **Strategic alignment and learning in human resource development: a hermeneutic exploration**

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The efficacy of human resource management, as a strategic activity, is frequently questioned in studies, and human resource development (HRD) has become caught-up in this debate. Despite increased training budgets, there remains ongoing uncertainty over the connection between HRD and business

success. Robust evidence from strategic evaluations is scant, leaving executives bereft of information on the beneficial effects of training. This scenario fuels scepticism such that when an organisation experiences a downturn, training expenditure is reduced.

To compensate, managers have adopted the term 'alignment' to symbolise an internally driven process of directing training expenditure towards strategic goals. There is much clichéd guidance in the pro-human resource literature on how to align training with strategy, but these offerings appear simplistic, or overplayed, and fail to recognise the complex circumstances in which organisations deploy strategy.

This thesis interrogated the notion of 'alignment' – and how organisations aligned learning towards business success. The research involved case studies in the New Zealand manufacturing sector. Individual interviews were held with chief executives, HR managers and union representatives, and focus group meetings with line managers and worker-learners. Information from the interviews was synthesised with findings from a focus group of independent experts.

Using a hermeneutic and qualitative methodology, the thesis examined how three organisations responded to global challenges, and explored how learning-centred projects concealed a multi-dimensional face of alignment, offering strengths and limitations to longer-term success. It highlighted factors that create misalignment and why training evaluations are often unsuccessful. The findings suggest that HRD learning initiatives are thematically configured to support the strategic intent and individuals who participate in workplace learning evaluate their level of engagement around a rich, socially-based construct of humanistic geography called 'place-making'. Furthermore, meaningful alignment occurs when people appraise their work environment and feel 'in place' with HRD initiatives and the business success.

### ▲ **Program evaluation: Improving open and distance learning student support services at a university**

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The purpose of the project was to evaluate existing Open and Distance Learning (ODL) student support services, describe a good practice model, and develop a workplace learning program to improve service provision. The research and evaluation questions investigated the context and background of the service by measuring its effectiveness during 2000-1. The thesis incorporates perspectives from a range of disciplines and research methodologies, with theory extending current research on student

support services, new learners and learning environments and stakeholder perspectives.

The study was multi-method, collecting data via two survey instruments to collect quantitative and qualitative data by interactive collectors from two comprehensive population samples across multiple sites. The study used non-experimental descriptive statistical analysis for quantitative data and the constant comparative method for qualitative data. The study was significant from customer satisfaction and continuous improvement perspectives, particularly as the higher education sector was undergoing a series of policy reforms and other changes.

The research study achieved three outcomes: (i) design, development and implementation of an internationally certified online program evaluation model to measure the effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) student support services; (ii) formation of three constructs for ODLSSS, staff and workplace learning; and (iii) a new workplace learning program for staff engaged in the service. The project was implemented with the Regional Liaison Officers at a Queensland university. The workplace learning program was mapped to the Diploma of Business National Training Package and included learning and assessment materials. Suggestions were made to access government funding for existing worker training.

#### **▲ A study of the lives of casual TAFE lecturers in metropolitan Perth.**

Priscilla Shorne (PhD)  
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Towards the end of the last century in Australia one aspect of the restructuring of work has been a major increase in the number of people who are employed on a casual basis. The 'traditional' full time permanent job is no longer available to many people. This project examines aspects of the personal and work lives of casual TAFE lecturers in the Perth metropolitan area. It provides a specific case study of workers who have been affected by the changes in the workforce which have developed over the past 25 years. In particular, these are workers who, given their tertiary education and work experience, would not necessarily have expected to be employed on a casual basis.

Supporters of the restructured workforce claim that work flexibility has advantages for the economy and for the employer and the employee alike, and argue that many are happy to work in this mode. This project seeks to test this assertion by considering the consequences for TAFE staff of casual work being adopted as a preferred employment model at TAFE in Western Australia. The study used a series of interviews with 40 casual TAFE lecturers, to

investigate such features as how people obtain and maintain work and whether they regard themselves as having a career. It looked at broader aspects such as stigma, insecurity and the place of risk in the workplace. The research shows that this mode of employment suits a subset of casual employees, but others pine for greater security and certainty in their working lives.

#### **▲ An investigation of trade trainers' perceptions of the Mayer key competencies**

Mary Cushnahan (Masters project)  
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This study examined difficulties associated with quantifying, qualifying, defining, teaching and assessing generic employability skills. Two small groups of teachers were interviewed for the study, using semi-structured interviews. The research showed that while there is an imperative to define a single teachable set of generic employability skills sets for young people in Australia, there are many logistical impediments to these skills actually being taught and assessed. It is suggested that a unit of competency on teaching generic skills could be included in the compulsory VET teacher qualification, the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.

#### **▲ Implementing online technologies into teaching practices at a TAFE institution: The barriers facing teachers**

Brad Shaw (Masters project)  
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This research project showed that technological complexities, validation and quality of assessment, e-facilitation and e-learning products, as well as the lack of time allocated to teachers to prepare and deliver online learning programs are the main reasons why teachers at the TAFE institute don't or won't use Online Technologies.

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**Don't forget the  
2010 AVETRA conference, 8-9 April,  
Holiday Inn, Surfers Paradise Gold Coast,  
with pre-conference workshops on 7 April**

<http://avetra.org.au/annual-conference>