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In training we trust: Communicating regional training need and demand to vocational education and training providers

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Australian Government
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

A National Vocational Education and Training **Research** and **Evaluation** Program **Report**

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ISBN 978 1 921412 81 3 print edition
ISBN 978 1 921412 82 0 web edition

TD/TNC 94.12

Published by NCVER
ABN 87 007 967 311

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<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2082.html>

About the research

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Peter Rushbrook and Richard Pickersgill, Charles Sturt University

The industry-led nature of the Australian vocational education and training (VET) system requires it to be responsive to employers' immediate and emerging skill needs. To be attuned to these needs, VET providers must be able to communicate effectively with industry and their communities and to gather market intelligence from available statistics. They must also be able to tap into sources of local knowledge.

This report examines the ways in which VET providers gather intelligence about training needs in their regions. The study examines the methods of communication between VET providers, industry and communities. Formal communication methods include client partnerships and advice from industries bodies, while informal methods include friendships and networks between employers, communities and VET providers.

Using an in-depth case study of the Riverina Region, the research shows that, while formal methods of communicating training needs are important, local networks can be just as useful.

Key messages

- Regular consultation between VET providers and both large and small enterprises is likely to improve information transfer between them.
- VET providers make limited use of available statistics on local training demand. Making better use of these data could help providers to build profiles of program demand.
- Formal partnerships with relevant organisations, such as chambers of commerce and regional development boards, can provide effective forums for discussing course demand and supply issues.
- Informal relationships between VET providers play an important role in the creation and supply of VET programs.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Ms Dawn Edwards and Mr John Rosser from Charles Sturt University for their assistance in gathering and analysing the case study data.

The authors would also like to thank those who participated in the case study, particularly: Ms Megan Mulrooney from COMPACT; Mr Tony McBride from Griffith Campus of Riverina Institute of TAFE; Mr Gary Brown from L M Byrne; and Mr John Collins from Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre.

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Project purpose

An essential part of a vocational education and training (VET) provider's business is assessing the demand for training in their particular area. For regional VET providers, accurately matching training demand with program supply requires engaging with the local communities. There are a variety of formal and informal ways in which VET providers can engage with their local communities to determine training needs.

This project examines the mechanisms used by training providers in the Riverina Region of southern New South Wales to assess the demand for training in their area. The research particularly focuses on the informal mechanisms, such as friendships and networks, that help training providers understand local training demand.

Methodology

This research uses an in-depth case study approach. Because of the researchers' detailed knowledge of the area and their formal and informal membership of regional vocational and community networks, the Riverina Region was selected for study. In addition, the region's diverse offering of agricultural produce, its array of educational institutions and government services, and small, medium and large enterprises make it a rich and rewarding research site.

As the operation of non-market or informal mechanisms and reaction to need and demand issues in this region appear 'typical', they are potentially applicable to similar interactions in other contexts, particularly rural areas.

The researchers undertook a range of focus groups and semi-structured individual and group interviews with VET providers, employers, community groups and VET clients. These were supplemented by examining descriptive demographic, industry and training participation statistics.

The researchers' findings are summarised below. They are grouped according to the five key questions that guided the research.

Findings

How is information about training needs (demand) transmitted to VET providers in rural and regional environments?

Formal VET provider and client partnerships and the communication networks established within them are effective processes for raising course demand and supply issues. Institutional membership of regional and local organisations, such as chambers of commerce and regional development boards, also provides forums for the informal and formal sharing of VET program demand and supply issues and challenges.

VET providers use training requests from small, medium and large employers to inform current and anticipated course development. Individual inquiries from potential students also signal course demand to providers and the aggregated data from these enquiries are used to develop program responses.

Program supply choices can also be informed by informal interpersonal communication based on long-standing and trustworthy professional relationships between particular education and enterprise staff members.

The researchers note that training decisions by providers are often based on traditional course supply and considerations about existing staff and equipment, rather than on researched need or responses to demand. VET providers are shown to make limited use of regional statistical data, and making better use of these data could help providers to build profiles of program demand and supply.

What is the role of regional and community groups in transmitting training needs to VET providers and in transmitting information about VET supply back to their communities?

Regional and community groups, such as city or town council business advisory committees and chambers of commerce, play an important role in advising training providers about new industries moving into the region and their potential demand for training programs.

These groups also provide existing industries, and new industries moving into the region, with training contacts and details of local training programs.

How accurate is the information about training need and how effective is the communication process?

The researchers consider local and regional advisory groups to be well connected and well placed to receive and communicate accurate and appropriate information about training needs to VET providers. However, due to the mix of formal and informal mechanisms in place, the researchers note that some data communicated from regional and community groups remain anecdotal.

The research suggests that further formal opportunities for interorganisational cooperation would lead to more detailed and accurate exchange of information about training needs.

How well are different sectors of the VET system integrated into their communities?

The sound integration of private and public VET providers into their local communities is demonstrated through institutional partnerships, individual membership of community groups, effective marketing strategies and other strategies such as open days and trade days.

What are the concrete arrangements that would improve information transfer between VET clients and the VET system in regional communities?

Information transfer between VET clients and the VET system could be improved by regular consultation between VET providers and large and small enterprises. Consultations between these groups could take the form of 'industry', 'employer' or 'trade' days or enterprise site visits that encourage provider and client interaction.

Information transfer could also be improved by VET providers, in consultation with local, state and federal government departments, by bringing together and distributing to local VET users, the best available statistics on local training demand. This distribution could take the form of regular seminars, purpose-built websites or local newsletters.

The establishment of VET provider reference groups that assess the local relevance of courses may also assist in information transfer. These reference groups could consist of large and small employers, employer groups, Indigenous groups, VET students and local government.

Introduction

Research purpose

This project examines the processes through which training needs are communicated to vocational education and training (VET) providers in the rural setting of the Riverina Region. The research looks particularly at the non-market mechanisms (such as friendships and networks) that can signal training need to vocational education and training providers.

The relationship between supply and demand in a number of sub-regions of the Riverina is illustrated through interviews with a range of VET providers, employers, community groups and VET users.

Research questions

The research uses five key questions to examine the formal and informal mechanisms by which VET providers understand their community's training needs:

- How is information about training needs (demand) transmitted to VET providers in rural and regional environments?
- What is the role of regional and community groups in transmitting training needs to VET providers and in transmitting information about VET supply back to their communities?
- How accurate is the information, and how effective is the communication process?
- How well are different sectors of the VET system integrated into their communities?
- What are the concrete arrangements that would improve information transfer between VET clients and the VET system in regional communities?

This section of the report describes the Riverina Region and why it was chosen as a case study site. This is followed by a discussion of regional VET provision, the supply and demand for training in regional areas, and the role of non-market mechanisms in communicating training requirements.

The Riverina Region

The Riverina was selected as the project case study site for its diversity in agriculture, industries and services.

The Riverina Region covers 76 346 square kilometres of southern New South Wales and consists of the valley of the Murrumbidgee River, the Snowy Mountains highlands and the western riverine plains to the west of Griffith.

The region has a population of 162 848. Wagga Wagga (58 005), Griffith (25 140) and Tumut (11 300) are considered to be the Riverina's regional centres.

Source: Graphic courtesy of the Riverina Regional Development Board (2006).

The Riverina is often described as Australia's 'bread basket', as annually it generates over one billion dollars worth of agricultural and horticultural produce. This is a significant component of the region's annual gross regional product (GRP) of A$4.5 billion. The region is Australia's largest producer of wine and grows over 65% of the New South Wales grape harvest, of which more than half is exported.

The regional infrastructure is well developed. The main north–south highway between Sydney and Melbourne and the main east–west highway between Sydney and Adelaide cross the region, as does the main north–south rail line. Two commercial airlines provide regular services from the larger regional towns to Sydney and Melbourne. Major educational facilities include the Riverina Institute of TAFE and Charles Sturt University (CSU). In addition to Charles Sturt University, research and development is well established on a number of New South Wales Department of Primary Industry sites, including the Wagga Wagga Agricultural Institute and the Inland Fisheries Centre at Narrandera (Riverina Regional Development Board 2006).

In spite of recent hardship resulting from a long period of drought, the region remains prosperous. The Riverina's diverse agricultural, manufacturing and services provision makes it a rich site for researching the relationship between training providers and their users. The project researchers have attempted to capture this diversity in their targeted interview schedules.

About regional VET provision

This section considers the supply and demand for training in regional areas and looks at the role of non-market mechanisms in communicating training requirements. It also positions the current research within a wider framework by acknowledging and building on recent research about Australian regional VET provision. Selected key themes and commonalities and differences between research methodologies are highlighted.

Training supply and demand and non-market mechanisms

In its simplest form a market is where one thing is exchanged for another. In economic theory, markets for goods or services allocate scarce resources through price signals. Price is the means by which buyers and sellers communicate to each other. In competitive markets, competition among suppliers leads to the lowest possible price. In a neoclassical world of perfect competition it is therefore the buyers (or the 'demand side') who determine the price of a good or service and the market will 'clear' when supply and demand balance. In the contemporary training market model the customers and consumers of training (industry and individuals) represent the 'demand side', while providers (technical and further education [TAFE] systems and other registered training organisations) represent the 'supply side'. Competition amongst suppliers, it is assumed, will lead to the optimum training outputs at the lowest price for consumers.

However, the transmission of information by price signals is only one aspect of social interaction. As anthropologists, sociologists and growth theorists have long pointed out, neither social stability nor economic growth is explicable by neoclassical market theory alone (for example, Polyani 1944; Bourdieu 1971; Rostow 1990; Romer 1994; Aspromourgos 2002). Rather, it is the growth of social and intellectual capital that sustains long-term social and economic development. And, according to modern growth theories, it is non-price-based exchanges and interactions that are significant to their development.

The proposal to use market mechanisms to increase training participation through the development of a 'training market' was raised by Deveson (1990) over 15 years ago. This proposal came at the tail end of tripartite approaches to the development of industry and training policies, exemplified by the Accords and Award Restructuring of the 1980s. The intention of Deveson was to increase the proportion of industry spending on training, which historically had been below that of comparative countries.

As a general approach, the policy intention to implement a 'training market' reflects an overall shift away from 'supply side' Keynesian policies to a neoclassical emphasis on the primacy of 'consumer sovereignty', expressed by the 'demand side' in a market. As such it reflects an historical shift from the 'Australian Settlement' of consensual regulatory tariff and industrial protection into an increasingly deregulated world during the period that Paul Kelly (1992) described as 'the End of Certainty'. The application of competition theory to the supply of training services through government financial interventions such as the funding rules associated with 'user choice'—where the client can select the training provider that suits their needs—are now familiar aspects of VET policy.

Studies in regional VET provision

The project acknowledges and builds on recent research on Australian regional VET provision. This section distils selected key themes across this research, all of which set out to identify the vocational education and training influences that may contribute to community efficacy and sustainability—the continued wellbeing and longevity of regional populations.

Clayton et al. (2004) focus on identifying the formal and informal community stakeholder partnerships, connections and networks that contribute to effective training delivery. A network-mapping exercise in this study identified strong provider connections with local government, large industries and employers, but not secondary schools. The authors argue that these community-based connections may assist in compensating the resourcing of training and supply deficits in a climate of 'thin markets' (pp.31–5).

Seddon and Billett's study (2004) identifies social partnerships as a crucial element for facilitating community efficacy and sustainability. They argue that community capacity-building may be achieved through the purposeful collective negotiation of partner interests and expectations, the

development of resource and support structures, the recognition of volunteer contributions, and the concise specification of partnership outcomes (p.5). They distinguish two forms of partnership: 'community partnerships', formed through existing localised networks more often than not brought together to focus on specific regional issues; and 'enacted social partnerships', established by groups external to the community, for example, government departments, but also focusing on significant regional issues (p.15). Both kinds of partnerships are considered to contribute equally to community efficacy and sustainability (p.28).

Similarly, Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006), although concentrating specifically on regional VET and school partnerships, share with Seddon and Billett a commitment to the efficacy of locally constituted partnerships contributing to regionally appropriate vocational outcomes and consequent community capacity-building and sustainability (p.7). They emphasise that to be effective this 'community cluster' approach must be driven by the community rather than by the VET program. This process promotes community ownership and engagement in the partnership process (p.10).

Allison, Gorringe and Lacey (2006) connect with the literature relating to social capital, or 'the network of relationships within a society that are built on trust, reciprocity and loyalty, and which can improve the efficiency of society by aiding coordinated action' (p.5). Closely related to the previous three studies and their concentration on capacity-building and social partnerships, Allison, Gorringe and Lacey (2006) extend the social capital argument to explain the creation of 'learning communities' as sites of best-practice VET provider and stakeholder partnerships. They criticise regional VET providers for not fully engaging with their communities and their tendency to privilege large over small business provision (p.7). As with Seddon and Billett (2004), Allison Gorringe and Lacey (2006) identify the importance of trust in sustaining informal and often voluntary participation in community partnerships (p. 23).

Waterhouse, Virgona and Brown (2006) also tap into the policy, practice and theories of learning communities, cities and towns, but within the rich context of the Victorian learning towns experiment (see also Wong 2004). Their study offers insights into the mechanisms demanded for the creation of successful community learning environments and in particular the requirement for the effective coordination of stakeholder interests. They emphasise the importance of government funding and 'the pivotal positioning of local government in exposing and profiling local industry and community needs' (p.33). Like Wong (2004), they also emphasise the crucial role of local government in coordinating the disparate community and professional elements constituting a learning community. In common with Allison, Gorringe and Lacey (2006), Waterhouse, Virgona and Brown (2006) note that 'stakeholders from educational institutions rarely adopted a proactive role' (p.7), once again demonstrating an area for educational providers, including VET, to address.

Research through VET providers

Participants in VET research are often identified through TAFE institutes and registered training organisations. For example, Clayton et al. (2004) identified focus group participants from a range of training package stakeholders, all of which were connected to the VET sector through TAFE institutes, private providers, secondary schools, adult and community education (ACE) providers, local government, Australian Apprenticeship Centres, and employers (p.13). Seddon and Billett (2004) identified 40 partnerships on the basis of their linkages to VET provision (pp.8–9). Allison, Gorringe and Lacey (2006) selected 12 case study regions 'to identify how the VET sector might engage more widely in the economic and social development of regions' (p.14). The regions were selected for their diverse economic, landscape, social and vocational education profiles, but included VET provision as a common theme. Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006) selected seven high school sites across Australia, based on the selection criteria of community and business involvement in leadership and management of site-based vocational programs, a proven record of school, community and business partnerships, regular communication between program stakeholders, documentation of program success, the development of local policy to guide the program or partnership, a wider community focus, and community recognition of the school's community focus (pp.18–19).

Researchers recognise the importance of investigating the experience of training users and contributors to regional partnerships; however, identifying research participants through the VET sector may overlook the contribution of potential VET users and enterprise 'VET outliers' who have yet to connect with the sector.

VET outliers are those individuals or groups with concerns about VET issues, but who are not currently involved with a VET provider or VET partnership arrangement.

Waterhouse, Virgona and Brown (2006) researched four case study sites suggested by the Victorian Local Governance Association (p.11). Unlike the other studies, their selection of case study sites was based on town or city learning communities rather than on particular institutional educational sites. Consequently, the researchers were better able to access data unmediated through formal education provision.

In an effort to capture the voices of provider personnel, end-users and VET outliers, the researchers in this project deliberately targeted a regional network of voluntary community service groups with no formal links to the VET sector. Typical members of the groups include tradespeople, professionals, educational practitioners, parents of students, VET students, employers and utility services workers, and local government representatives, to name but a few. The random membership of the groups was intended to garner a comprehensive overview of regional perceptions of VET provision.

Methodology

The research focuses on one region as a case study site and builds on the methodologies and conclusions offered by the five studies discussed in the previous section. Data were gathered through focus groups and semi-structured individual and group interviews. In addition to discussion of 'non-market mechanisms' and their operation within vocational education contexts in a defined rural area, a critical assessment of recent rural and regional vocational education literature provided a project context and research rationale. Further desktop research and site visits provided publicly accessible data on a range of training providers and users.

A case study approach

We have made use of a single site, the Riverina Region, in order to develop an in-depth profile of community and VET provider interaction. The concentrated utilisation of focus groups, one-on-one and small-group interviews with local government officers, public and private vocational education providers, schools, business advisory groups, primary producers and voluntary community groups gives a complex and detailed picture of a region, one that is not available to research conducted in multiple regional sites. Allison, Gorringe and Lacey (2006, p.19), for example, remark that had 'we [had] more time to collect the regional data, then more extensive interviewing, incorporating local councillors, chambers of commerce, industry organisations and a more thorough discussion with catchment authorities might have been pursued'. Based on this and similar observations, the project has attempted to provide this additional analytical depth as a way to supplement and extend recent excellent research in the field. The researchers believe particular issues and conclusions identified in the project may be applicable to other similar rural and regional locations.

In Stake's terminology the project uses an 'instrumental case study approach'. The Riverina, then, is considered a single example 'mainly to provide insight into an issue' (Stake 2005, p.445). In this project the 'issue' is the communication of training need and demand to VET providers. The Riverina and its VET contexts will be examined in depth.

The project's key research approaches are outlined below.

Qualitative data analysis

Data gathered through case studies, focus groups, key informants, site visits and desktop research were workshopped by the researchers and analysed and coded in a series of matrices. The process identified emergent themes and sub-themes. The analyses followed a 'constant comparison' cycle drawn from grounded theory (Strauss & Corben 1990), which ascribes significance to data as they are progressively and comparatively abstracted and reduced through synthesis, incremental coding and 'data saturation' (Sarantakos 2001, pp.202–5). A synthesis based on the resulting 'data spiral' (Leedy & Ormond 2001, pp.160–1) informs the project's outcomes.

Interviews were conducted with key informants selected from conversations with VET providers, vocational education partnership groups and the focus groups. An interview protocol was developed and approved by the university ethics committee (appendix A) and an information sheet distributed outlining the project details (appendix B). Our informal conversational style of interviewing quickly led to information being generated randomly across the planned protocol. This

led to the desired effect of producing more candid personal narratives and the welcome dissolution of the interviewer–interviewee barrier (Foley & Valenzuela 2005, p.223). People interviewed included public and private VET educators and administrators, large and small enterprise employers and managers, tradespeople and VET outliers.

Focus groups have been used in the manner suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) as spaces 'to elicit and validate collective testimony, to give a voice to the previously silenced by creating a safe space for sharing one's life experiences' (p.648). We conducted six focus groups across a sample of large and small regional towns. Each session began with an outline of the contemporary VET context, a current statement of project findings (each session was, therefore, different) and an invitation to comment on our statements, guided by the focus group questions (see appendix A). Both researchers took detailed notes and later conferred to cross-check the gathered information.

Desktop research

In addition to consulting relevant literature (see the previous section) we also conducted a wide-reaching search of publicly available information and visited enterprises and vocational education providers. This information either added useful data for the project context or confirmed data collected through the focus group and interview processes.

Descriptive statistics

We have adopted a mixed method approach to the research project, a practice we have adopted in previous projects (Smith et al. 2005; Kemmis et al. 2006). In addition to data drawn from the qualitative interview process we also believe valuable insights may be drawn from a range of descriptive statistical techniques utilising data drawn from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and other state and regional locations. Coupled with the project emphasis on a single in-depth case study site, the researchers believe that the inclusion of descriptive statistics further contributes to the methodologies available to investigate regional VET demand and supply.

VET outliers

Drawing from the previous research mentioned we have made use of public and private providers and VET partnership groups to identify key informants from industry and other groups. However, we recognise also the existence of VET outliers and have sought their views. VET outliers typically include those not involved directly with VET providers or community partnerships but who may do so in the future; for example, school leavers and the parents of school leavers. VET outliers may have had recent poor experience with providers and are currently disengaged; for example, small employers, the unemployed or disadvantaged. The challenge of accessing VET outliers was tackled by organising focus groups drawn from voluntary community groups not directly connected with the VET sector but consisting of members who engage often or occasionally. While a full range of VET outliers was not contactable, we believe we have collected enough data to recognise their contribution to understanding the complexities of regional VET provision.

Case studies

The project's findings are presented in two sections. The first section considers four case studies that reflect a range of formal and informal approaches to communicating training need and demand. The next section discusses the findings drawn from the key informant and focus groups interviews and from the researchers' site visits and desktop research.

Four case studies: Communicating need and demand

This section outlines examples of the way in which two regional VET providers; one school and employer career and training partnership; and one employer respond to need-and-demand pressures. It also considers the circumstances where these groups utilise non-market mechanisms to influence or access VET program demand and supply.

First, Riverina Institute's Griffith Campus is considered as a best-practice example of a VET provider that effectively utilises extensive local partnerships and professional networks to meet local VET demand and influence program supply. Second, the Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre in Yanco is examined as a VET provider facing the dual challenges of organisational restructure and rural economic downturn, yet still providing relevant and cost-effective training to its regional and national client base. Third, Wagga Wagga's COMPACT partnership between local secondary schools and employers is presented as an effective organisation utilising both formal and informal networks to facilitate post-compulsory structured career and transition education and workplace experience. Finally, regional heavy transport trailer manufacturer and supplier LM Byrne is considered as an example of a dynamic regional employer utilising a range of formal and informal strategies to facilitate access to labour supply and the VET sector.

Riverina Institute of TAFE (Griffith Campus)

The Griffith campus is located within a geographically isolated area in the western Riverina. Griffith is the second largest regional centre after Wagga Wagga; its population of 25 000 oversees a diverse economic base underwritten by irrigation-based agriculture, including wine and grape production, citrus fruits and rice. The area's large geographic area, the economic and social challenges engendered by prolonged drought conditions and consequent reduced irrigation water allocations have re-emphasised the local reality of thin training and employment markets and thus challenge VET program provision. However, within this relative isolation, the Griffith community possesses a tangible resolve to create a range of formal and informal partnerships to progress further a dynamic and largely self-sustaining community.

Within the Griffith campus the combination of professional and social networks has produced a range of VET provider and business partnerships dedicated to self- and community sustainability and capacity-building. The campus is driven by a leadership team that actively promotes TAFE's changing role, from a largely government-funded organisation offering a supply-driven suite of programs, to one that has enjoyed a rapid 500 per cent increase in non-government activity sensitive to local demand. Local campus initiative is further enhanced by Riverina Institute of TAFE's 'federation' approach of structurally encouraging local autonomy and initiative.

A major initiative within the campus is the $3.2 million Wine and Food Centre which was built following lobbying by the region's wine industry for formal and locally conducted training based around the Certificate II/III Wine Production and the Certificate II/III Food Production, Viticulture and Horticulture programs. Ninety-five per cent of training takes place on the job, with short courses offered in the Wine and Food Centre. Laboratory programs are offered in second semester to fit within the harvest cycle. An industry reference group ensures that the programs remain relevant through effective mutual information transfer.

The campus management's encouragement of staff member initiatives to facilitate local industry partnerships has further enhanced a close relationship between course demand and supply. A $650 000 revamp of the campus's Hair and Beauty Department was encouraged through staff initiative to bring together isolated local hairdressing businesses and organise them into an effective industry training voice. Student numbers are now in excess of 110. The campus has just taken delivery of a Community Services building worth $6.2 million. The facility will deliver training in nursing, aged care, allied health, and child studies, with community welfare also planned. The facility was enabled, through strong community pressure, to deliver enrolled nurse training in the Griffith area and to focus on the needs of the greater western Riverina area. The Automotive Department maintains active partnerships with local agricultural and vehicle dealerships, which provide a range of cars and engines for apprentice training. Local employers visit the campus regularly and remain satisfied that the department's ageing equipment provides excellent training opportunities for students to work on manual machinery before they move on to automated and computerised workplace technologies. Partnerships with high schools have ensured strong VET in Schools courses for over 250 students, who are regularly bussed in from across the region. Specific community partnerships include negotiated program funding for Indigenous groups, migrants and people with a range of disabilities.

While staff members within the campus are excited by the autonomy and opportunities presented to them, they occasionally express frustration about some of the state-based policy caveats placed on their initiatives. Foremost among these are the limitations placed on course viability numbers, thus reducing training opportunities for the local population, or requiring students to travel large distances to access the final years of apprenticeship and other programs.

Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre (Yanco)

The Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre in Yanco, close to the town of Leeton, began operation in 1908 as the Yanco Experimental Farm and offered full-time residential education and training for farm apprentices and the sons and daughters of farmers. In the aftermath of both world wars Yanco was renowned as a trainer of irrigation techniques for returned soldiers. From the mid-1980s demand for long-term residential training was reduced because of shifting farm ownership patterns and social dynamics. From 1987 a short-course program was initiated to offset this declining trend in program participation. However, by 2000 student numbers had reduced to non-viable levels, a situation further exacerbated by the current drought. In 2003 Yanco's full-time education function ceased and the site was reinvented as the Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre and became a provider of rural short-course programs. From 2005 the Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre became a campus of the Hunter Region's Tocal College.

Given its reduced circumstances, the Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre was required to reassess its role as an iconic local provider of rural education and training. In a similar position to the nearby Griffith TAFE campus, it concentrated its efforts on demand and supply challenges of its courses and their resolution. However, unlike larger public providers of rural vocational education and training, the Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre was required to reconstitute itself on a fee-for-service, full cost-recovery basis.

The Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre is meeting these challenges in a range of interesting ways. In a location and in times of thin markets the centre acknowledges its regional positioning to service the needs of 'conscripted learners' or those clients requiring mandated training in such areas

as chemicals handling (biodegradability and produce-withholding periods), occupational health and safety, and fruit-handling quality assurance (fruit appearance and handling). These courses are most often undertaken by farmers required to comply with produce buyer quality assurance standards or to meet criteria for government farming subsidies and drought-relief programs.

The Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre also supplies a range of rural short-course programs linked to the Australian Qualifications Framework. As a campus of the New South Wales Department of Primary Industry's only registered training organisation, with Tocal College its primary site, the centre has assumed a major role as a supplier of printed short-course programs produced through its SMARTrain brand. Targeted and effective marketing has extended its courses across Australia. Further short courses are offered through the Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre's PROfarm program, the Aboriginal Rural Training Program (farm labour and management courses) and a marginal viticulture and irrigation program based in Wagga Wagga.

The Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre has made use of innovative approaches to attract an increasing share of the rural fee-for-service market. It offers courses in such diverse areas as four-wheel drive programs for veterinarians and their workers, with an emphasis on safety and reduction of vehicle wear and tear, and windmill repair classes offered to hobby farmers at point-of-sale. These areas are accessed through listening to the learning demands of rural enterprises and workers and further workshopped and developed by centre staff.

The shift to full cost recovery programs has required a move away from meeting the needs of local farmers, who find it difficult to fund participation in 'voluntary' self-funded rural extension programs. In a recent inquiry into rural skills training the New South Wales Farmers' Association argued that the relocation of residential programs to Tocal did not reflect the Riverina's quite different climatic and geographic conditions and imposed unnecessary hardship on local farming students (New South Wales Legislative Council 2006, pp.46–7).

The Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre is an excellent example of a rural training organisation adapting to changes in internal and external supply and demand requirements. The organisation's shift to fee-for-service short courses has transferred its supply focus to a national audience and made it more receptive to the demands of existing and new client groups. Many of its innovative programs have been developed through commercial as well as social networking contacts, including ideas developed from agricultural field days, short-course clients and professional gatherings.

COMPACT (Wagga Wagga and Cootamundra)

COMPACT is a community-based not-for-profit local community partnership. It is funded by the Australian Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (formerly the Department of Education, Science and Training). Its Career Advice Australia initiative provides structured workplace learning and career and transition support services to all 13 to 19-year-old secondary students in the Riverina's Wagga Wagga and Central Murrumbidgee areas. COMPACT has offices in Wagga Wagga and Cootamundra and is managed by a community-based board, consisting of educators, employers and community representatives.

COMPACT"s structured work placements are a mandatory part of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training's requirement for successful completion of VET Certificate I and II qualifications. These qualifications are part of Years 11 and 12 studies in areas such as hospitality, business services, information technology, primary industry and metals and engineering. COMPACT maintains an extensive database of employers for structured work placements and actively seeks employer participation through schemes such as 'Adopt a School Programme', which encourages businesses to 'adopt' local schools so that they can provide 'hands on' learning experiences in specific industry sectors—preferably in an emerging sector or one where there is a skills shortage. These programs provide students with insights into the workplace and employability skills. An example of this program is the 'Build a Bridge … and Get Over it' Engineering Camp held in partnership with the Riverina Regional Organisation of Councils (REROC) and Pipes Wagga.

Career and transition support services are offered through community partnerships with employers, VET providers and local government organisations. Site visits, guest speakers and employability skills workshops are offered, in addition to themed days with titles such as 'Trades and Traineeships Expo', 'TVET Expo', Health Expo, CSU Performing Arts Expo and 'Pathways to Employment Expo'.

COMPACT staff members regard their primary roles as 'in-betweeners' or education and training mediators who bring together VET providers, employers, parents, young people, and students aged 13 to 19 years for the purpose of promoting the benefits of the VET sector. Information flows are facilitated that would not exist without COMPACT's networking capacities.

COMPACT staff found it easier to place students in small-to-medium businesses, perhaps because of personal networking. Larger organisations were regarded as more difficult because of lack of specific contact people and complex bureaucratic requirements. A concern was expressed that a large regional city such as Wagga Wagga may be growing too large to establish viable employment and education partnerships, compared with those existing in smaller towns such as Cootamundra, Leeton, Griffith and Tumut. This suggests the importance of the integrated social and professional networks in these locations that are able to facilitate employer–student partnerships. As a community grows larger, these networks may drift apart and prevent the chance encounters that can facilitate employment and training opportunities.

The long-term facilitation of a climate of trust between COMPACT staff and employers has produced an interesting side effect of the organisation's facilitation of full-time student employment opportunities. Employers ring COMPACT and ask 'Have you got a kid suited for my workplace?' On themed days such as annual 'mock interviews', where students are put through a simulated job interview, Rotary Club volunteers are used as interview panellists, and employers or managers may offer students full-time apprenticeship or traineeship positions. Employers occasionally also offer full-time positions to structured workplace training students.

LM Byrne (Wagga Wagga)

LM Byrne is a private company which was established in Peak Hill, western New South Wales, during the early 1970s. As the company grew it relocated to Wagga Wagga and established a large facility for the design, manufacture and marketing of heavy transport trailers, including tippers, bulk haulage, road train, heavy duty and stock models.

The company has a strong commitment to VET and currently employs 30 apprentices in a range of trades. It places high priority on in-house and outsourced learning and development strategies and actively promotes a progressive workplace ethos, based on best-practice teamwork, risk management and occupational health and safety standards.

The company's Human Resources Department adopts an active and innovative approach to labour recruitment and training that is built on wide experience and knowledge of the local labour market and VET providers. For example, after advertising locally and nationally for welders and receiving few applicants, the company recruited 17 Chinese welders and two automotive electricians who rapidly adapted to the range of skills demanded. The human resources manager accessed the workers through a migration agent. The company has assisted the migrant workers with accommodation, family migration and English lessons. Further national worker recruitment is facilitated through informal local and national manufacturer networking, even though it means working with 'natural' competitors. The networks created, however, are producing long-term benefits through their 'swings and roundabouts' mutuality.

Labour shortages resulting from the company's regional location and the exodus of qualified tradespeople and skilled workers to the mining boom west also led to a shortage of supervisory staff. Many shopfloor workers were promoted to these roles without possessing the requisite communication and line-management leadership skills. The Human Resources Department

contracted local VET providers to offer frontline management programs and was active in shaping program content to its specific needs. A feature of the client–provider partnership is the high level of trust between enterprise training managers and known educators within the VET provider.

LM Byrne's success through innovative labour recruitment and training practices can be attributed largely to the capacity of its human resources personnel to network effectively with similar organisations and create sustainable partnerships with local VET providers. The most important networks are considered 'high value' and nurtured through targeted interaction. Leadership by a dynamic VET 'evangeliser' (Smith et al. 2005, p.8), a manager with a deep knowledge of and long experience with the VET sector who emphasises to the company the value of credentialled training, has consequently kept the organisation in the forefront of its market.

Key themes from the case studies

The importance of trust in provider–user relationships

Trust is the major theme across the project's qualitative data. Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) suggest that 'trust' as a concept is used so variably that it has become 'useless for theoretical or analytic purposes' (p.88). To address this they propose trust be defined specifically as inherent to 'the situated, observable and accountable reciprocity of every micro interaction' (p.104), so that, when closely analysed, 'the fundamental nature of trust is revealed as the observable and accountable reciprocity of [micro social] interaction' (p.104). Similarly, Allison, Gorringe and Lacey (2006) suggest 'that trust business' is manifested in a range of negotiated and reciprocal formal and informal provider–client networks and partnerships that through 'shared values, build social capital' (p.23). Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006, p.7) and Clayton et al. (2004, pp.8, 34) also note a strong relationship between observable and accountable reciprocity through networking, collaboration and partnerships and the production of sustainable social capital in rural communities, with Clayton et al. noting that 'trust seems to be very much dependent on personalities and personal relationships rather than more formal arrangements between participating organisations' (2004, p.34).

The project revealed many examples of networks, collaborations and partnerships built on formal and informal trust arrangements at individual and collective levels. These relationships were often created through an overlap of professional and social networks, whether in major regional centres or small townships. This pattern suggests that, contrary to the literature on non-market mechanisms or 'intellectual spillovers' which emphasises the stimulating influence of geographical proximity (Breschi & Lissoni 2000; Glaeser 2000), the potential isolating effects of geographic distance are mitigated by the closeness of social 'distance' in relationships formed in local and regional, overlapping professional and social networks. This is particularly evident in the cross-networking of social and professional activity in community-based voluntary service groups. The object of the groups is community service, but professional networking is an inevitable consequence of the trusting relationships formed. The same pattern of activity also results from participation in sporting clubs, school committees and children's interest groups. Clayton et al. (2004) observe that 'although there may be a perception that rural communities are scattered and not cohesive they, in fact, see themselves as "close" ' (2004, p.8).

For VET provider–client relationships the interplay of social and professional networks produces a range of training opportunities. The friendships created in one population centre's chamber of commerce, for example, has led to productive training partnerships between a public VET provider and many local enterprises whose managers and professionals are chamber members. In a small town's community service group, friendships between members across the education and private enterprise sectors have provided public VET contacts for apprenticeship training opportunities. Regular participation in a school–employer partnership organisation has encouraged several employers to use the organisation as a trusted source of youth labour recruitment.

At another level friendships through long-term training partnerships based on trust between employers, enterprise managers and VET sector professionals have led to some interesting relationships. In one case a regional public utility that was seeking certified VET provider engineering training for its staff members was able to access a suitable program, but unable to provide appropriately qualified teaching staff. A solution was reached, with the utility providing its

professional engineers as educators. This was made possible because of the long-term utility provider's trust in program provision, based on success and confidence in the organisational capacities of the partners involved. Similarly, owners of small enterprises often relied on personal contacts with known VET provider professionals to meet their apprenticeship and traineeship needs.

Using local networks

A further theme underwritten by trust and social and professional networking relates to regional VET providers recruiting 'locals' as staff members, particularly for their entrepreneurial program marketing activities. Clayton et al. (2004) recognise the importance of 'local' providers in rural communities and the general lack of community trust in or support for 'outsider' providers originating in other regions or capital cities, because of their perceived lack of understanding of training needs and the expatriation of profits and expertise to non-local locations (p.22). Seddon and Billett (2004) similarly note the potentially alienating effects of 'enacted' local partnerships constructed by 'external' government and non-government sponsors, but acknowledge the mitigating effects of their auspicing by community agencies or groups. COMPACT in Wagga Wagga and Cootamundra (see the case study in the previous chapter), for example, is a highly successful government-sponsored organisation auspiced by community management to link secondary students with employers through a range of training pathways.

Within the region, too, VET providers remain conscious of the social and market value of recruiting 'in town' staff for their respective branches. Not only does internal recruitment support local community members, but it also brings the VET provider 'ready made' social and professional networks of immediate value within the region's 'thin markets', offering considerable competitive advantage over rival organisations lacking equivalent staff. One regional VET provider, for example, recruited a well-known and respected local to one of its smaller branches with expertise in the transport distribution industry. The branch rapidly grew by offering transport-related apprenticeship and traineeship programs. In another example, with an interesting twist, a professional development officer from a growers' organisation, although not from the region, was nevertheless considered 'local' because of his parallel experience with the industry in another area. His knowledge of irrigation farming and capacity to import, modify and implement innovative practices and training programs immediately won the trust of his clients. In a final example, a local's appointment to a regional development body after a period working outside the region had the effect of importing new knowledge and skills, while maintaining a known and trusted operator who was able to 'contact the gatekeepers'.

Responding to changing agricultural sector training needs

The Riverina, as with most of inland New South Wales, has been drought-declared for several years across most of its large area. In irrigated areas around Leeton and Griffith, water allocations for the production of citrus fruits, rice and grapes have been reduced and productivity is suffering. In non-irrigated areas producing cattle, sheep and grain crops, such as wheat, canola and barley, critical shortages of rainfall have meant low or negative profit margins. With agriculture a key driver of regional towns' retail and services provision, population centres are also suffering economically. The drought 'trickle down' effect has also affected many aspects of VET provision.

The drought has shifted the agricultural sector's training needs. In what may be a generational change, focus group and key informant interviews suggest that family-based rural producers are actively discouraging their children from continuing the family tradition of working the land. Instead, children are encouraged to 'go on to bigger and better things' such as off-farm university professional education. Reduced economic circumstance has also shifted rural-based training demand. Farm producers are seeking fewer farming apprenticeships and other credentialled training opportunities. It is also becoming increasingly difficult to recruit suitable apprentices, as large regional manufacturers pay above apprentice rates for unskilled work. Combined with a demographic trend of a reducing youth labour market, the rural–urban drift and the lure of lucrative jobs in the mining boom west, the general shortage of available workers is likely to continue.

Skill-based short courses, usually fee-for-service, are also in decline because of a lack of farm income, in spite of available government subsidies (such as FarmBis and ChemCert programs). Within the citrus industry, for example, training generally assumes the form of mandatory fee-based compliance programs: occupational health and safety, chemical management and usage, fruit handling and water conservation. An emerging challenge in this area is the need for English language training for ageing immigrant farmers experiencing difficulty in reading instructions for chemical use and safety compliance instructions. There is also a need for training in using new technologies.

VET providers are responding to this challenge by delivering 'hands on' and 'on site' training. Two regional VET providers stated that most of their new business was in the area of compliance training, with traditional apprenticeship programs either stable or in decline. Although actively promoting apprenticeship and traineeship supply, the reality for these and other training providers is that demand for mandatory programs will probably increase. A recent Australian Government report suggests that, nationally, VET providers are 'failing to deliver what rural industries need—work ready employees with relevant skills' (House Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry 2007, p.36). The influence of the drought and low farm income in the Riverina, however, remains an overwhelming influence on agricultural training demand and supply.

Communicating training needs through non-training organisations

The project researchers agree with Clayton et al. (2004) that the change drivers affecting VET program supply and demand are shared across Australia and globally. Workforce retention, competitive pressures, change management and evolving technologies apply equally to urban, peri-urban and regional and remote settings. In addition, drought, shifting primary produce prices and labour shortages through demographic and rural–urban migration further affect regional training supply and demand considerations (pp.16–17).

In a climate of thin markets, competing VET providers and challenging labour markets, conventional assumptions about VET provider activity may not be the most effective approach to maximise regional training supply or meet demand. Billett and Hayes (2000) argue that approaches emphasising a 'mutuality of needs', rather than siloed competition may be a more appropriate regional response (p.12). The researchers draw from the comments by Billett and Hayes on the possibilities for cross-regional organisational cooperation and facilitation within the existing competitive market environment.

Evidence for cross-regional and population centre organisational cooperation and training facilitation suggests a vital role for national, state, regional and local government and professional organisations working together to maximise opportunities for large and small enterprises to communicate their training needs to VET providers. In this reading of 'mutuality of needs', these non-training organisations paradoxically cooperate to encourage a healthy regional training market. One of the region's large population centres, for example, has enacted this approach to its community's advantage. Regional development body representatives, a local government business development unit, a business enterprise centre and a chamber of commerce officer regularly cooperate to bring together enterprises, both established and new, to the region, and training providers to work on tailored training solutions. Through an accident of geography the cooperating organisations are located on the same street and organisational operatives regularly 'bump into one another' in coffee shops and car parks. They also, according to one senior manager, 'do the same seminars together'. This informal interaction has created a social and professional network where knowledge of individuals and organisations leads to quick and accurate referrals of clients according to need. Organisational members tend to be experienced professionals and are deeply connected to local business and community networks. Many of the organisations have management boards or memberships that include representatives from training providers.

Smaller population centres, too, engage in similar cooperative activity, although on a smaller scale. Community service groups in particular provide opportunities for training provider representatives, farmers, professionals, and large and small business operators to interact and discuss training needs.

Community service projects and meetings create friendships, which can sometimes be turned to commercial advantage. In one service group, for example, apprenticeships are regularly organised through the recommendation of 'a good kid' by a high school principal member. Visiting speakers drawn from training organisations further add to networking and recruitment possibilities.

Course supply and small business needs

A significant barrier to the communication of needs between clients and providers in rural areas is presented by the external bureaucratic restrictions placed on program supply. For many VET providers, prescribed minimum course numbers limit the range of available courses. The course supply quandary created may mean that enterprises with specialist needs are disadvantaged and forced to send their trainees to city or other regional centres, while in others, specialisation may circumvent their more generic requirements. This supply restriction often has more impact on smaller enterprises, as larger businesses are likely to employ more trainees. In other scenarios training providers may offer only the introductory or final years of programs, or undertake courses not fully meeting their or their employers' needs. Clayton et al. (2004) define this as 'a frustration commonly expressed by training providers, industry and community representatives and employers related to bureaucratic rules and regulations, which they felt often prevented them from being as flexible as they needed to be to better serve their clients' (p.8). Similarly, Waterhouse, Virgona and Brown (2006) noted barriers to educational program participation caused by a provider's 'lack of flexibility' and, among other factors, an unwillingness to 'move outside established job descriptions to develop new and innovative curriculum and ways of working' to cater for unmet needs (p.32).

Although providers are aware of client needs, in many cases their responses are both restricted and inadequate. At one provider, a solution for one applicant was to shift his enrolment to another trade entirely—from automotive to baking. An employer from the air conditioning industry reported dissatisfaction with a local provider who required block release to be completed in Sydney. Consequently, he shifted his trainees to Canberra. The young teenage apprentices could not cope with the city, enduring poor-standard accommodation and the theft of some of their property. The same air conditioning enterprise, not satisfied with local provider responses to their qualified engineering needs, attempted to work with other regional air conditioning companies to recruit 'common staff' who would operate across their enterprises. This approach, called by Billett and Hayes (2000, p.12) a 'mutuality of needs between clusters of small enterprises engaged in the same vocational practice', appeared a workable solution, even though the respective enterprises were competitors. However, the plan was abandoned, as it was seen as potentially running foul of national anti-competitive legislation. In a smaller regional town a garage and service station owner expressed concern that his requests for more generic automotive apprenticeship programs remained unheard because regional training providers generated more business through meeting the specialist needs of large automotive dealers.

These examples suggest that a range of regional training solutions, based on cooperation or competition, are possible, with a reduction in external bureaucratic regulation. Greater flexibility, then, would enable providers, large and small, to respond more effectively to the needs of individuals and large and small enterprises. Opening up the market by extending the capacity of enterprise-based registered training organisations to offer specialist training may be one solution. Another might include a revision of anti-competition legislation to permit enterprises to cooperate and share staff within thin-market environments.

Descriptive statistics: Assessing need and demand

This section reports on the preliminary descriptive statistics approach the researchers applied to New South Wales and the Riverina using ABS census data and data from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training's Integrated Vocational Education and Training (IVET) system. It is presented in order to demonstrate how statistical data can be used to assess supply and demand for training.

Demography

The demographic characteristics of the Riverina differ from the New South Wales and Australian averages. As shown in table 1, the percentage of Australian-born in the Riverina in 2006 was much greater than for New South Wales or Australia. Australian citizenship was also significantly higher than for the state or for Australia. Not surprisingly, English-only usage at home was also greater in the Riverina compared with New South Wales and Australia.

Table 1 Person characteristics (percentages), 2006

	Riverina Region	New South Wales	Australia
	%	%	%
Australian born	86.7	69.0	70.9
Australian citizenship	91.7	85.8	86.1
English only spoken at home	89.9	74.0	78.5
Age groups:			
0–4 years	7.1	6.4	6.3
5–14 years	15.3	13.4	13.5
15–24 years	14.3	13.3	13.6
25–54 years	38.7	42.0	42.2
55–64 years	10.5	11.0	11.0
65 years and over	14.1	13.8	13.3
Total number of persons ('000)	134.4	6 549.2	19 855.3

Source: ABS 2006 census (Riverina, derived from Commonwealth Electoral Division CD07).

Although the *median* age of the Riverina population is slightly lower (36 years) than New South Wales or Australia (both 37 years), the *distribution* is different. The Riverina has a greater proportion of young people below working age (0–14 years) than either New South Wales or Australia. It also has a higher proportion aged over 65 than the state or Australia (table 1). The proportion in the prime-age workforce is lower than the state or national averages. This reflects an overall 'flight from the bush', as young people leave school, other education and training, or move around after 25 years of age, and older people remain in the region.

Employment and industry

The Riverina Region also exhibits interesting differences in employment structure, which suggests a different set of training needs compared with urban Australia.[1] Table 2 shows that, as would be expected, employment in agriculture is significantly higher in the Riverina than in New South Wales and Australia. Agriculture is the largest single employment category in the Riverina, at around 12.5%.

Manufacturing employment is also strong in the Riverina Region, at around 10%, similar to the 2006 national average of 10.5%. However, whereas employment in manufacturing as a proportion of the workforce has been in long-term decline nationally, in the Riverina it has slightly increased over the past 15 years. Part of the explanation is that manufacturing in the Riverina is significantly directed towards supporting agriculture and the transport industry, with an emphasis on maintenance and repair and general structural engineering. These industries rely on traditional engineering skilled trades (welding, fitting and machining, hydraulics, structural fabrication), which is reflected in the steady demand for apprenticeships (table 5). There is some process manufacturing in agricultural products (food and timber) and it is expected that recent expansion in rail transport repair and timber products (Wagga) will hold this figure steady, or even increase demand.

Table 2 Employment by industry: Riverina Region, New South Wales, Australia 2006

	Riverina Region	New South Wales	Australia
	%	%	%
Agriculture/forests/fishing	12.5	2.7	3.1
Retail trade	12.0	11.1	11.3
Manufacturing	10.1	9.6	10.5
Health care & social assistance	9.7	10.5	10.5
Education & training	8.6	7.6	7.7
Public administration & safety	7.7	6.0	6.7
Construction	6.1	7.6	7.8
Accommodation/cafes/restaurants	6.1	6.5	6.3
Transport & storage	4.7	5.0	4.7
Wholesale trade	3.9	4.7	4.3
Other services	3.7	3.8	3.7
Professional, scientific & technical services	3.3	7.3	6.6
Non-classifiable/not stated	2.3	2.7	2.6
Administrative & support services	2.3	3.1	3.2
Finance & insurance	1.8	5.0	3.8
Utilities	1.2	1.0	1.0
Rental, hiring & real estate services	1.1	1.7	1.7
Communication services	1.0	2.4	1.9
Arts & recreation services	0.7	1.4	1.4
Mining	0.4	0.7	1.2
Total number of employed persons ('000)	609.2	2 909.4	91 0418.4

Source: ABS (2006, first release).

Retail is the second largest employment sector in the Riverina Region at 12%, slightly higher than the New South Wales and national figures (11.1% and 11.3%, respectively). Although these differences are quite small, what is different about the Riverina is that there is a much higher

[1] Some caution needs to be taken in comparing 2006 data with previous years due to a series change in 2006, and the fact that the data are first release, whereas previous years are based on the final ABS release.

proportion of female employment in retail in the Riverina than for New South Wales or Australia (16.0%, 13.7% and 14.1%, respectively [ABS 2006]).

Regional wholesale trade is largely concerned with the sale and distribution of primary products, in particular in bulk storage and handling, areas in which male employment predominates over, for example, retail wholesaling and light goods distribution companies found on the peripheries of the major metropolitan areas. Gender differences can also be detected in other major employment categories, with even larger differences, when individual (small) rural local government areas are compared with the regional centres.

Overall, this suggests that *different* approaches to VET training needs are required, both in terms of the content and qualifications needed and in the mode of delivery most suited to local conditions.

This point is further discussed below in conjunction with the greater demand for traineeships in the Riverina compared with metropolitan areas.

Education, training and qualifications

Table 3 indicates the distribution of post-school qualifications across the population.[2]

Table 3 Distribution of education qualifications, all persons, 1991–2006

	Riverina Region				New South Wales				Australia
	1991 %	1996 %	2001 %	2006 %	1991 %	1996 %	2001 %	2006 %	2006 %
Tertiary qualifications:									
Postgraduate degree	0.6	0.8	1.0	1.4	1.1	1.6	2.2	3.7	3.1
Graduate dip/grad cert	1.0	1.2	1.0	1.2	1	1.3	1.2	1.5	1.7
Bachelor degree	3.4	5.0	6.5	9.0	5.8	8.0	10.1	14.6	13.9
Total university	**4.9**	**7.0**	**8.6**	**11.6**	**7.8**	**10.9**	**13.6**	**19.9**	**18.7**
Advanced diploma/diploma	4.8	5.0	4.5	6.2	5.2	6.5	6.2	8.9	8.5
VET qualifications:									
Certificate III & IV	9.9	10.9	14.2	19.4	10.6	10.9	13.1	16.5	16.7
Certificate I & II	3.8	3.2	2.5	2.6	3.9	3.2	2.7	1.5	1.4
Total VET	**13.8**	**14.1**	**16.7**	**19.5**	**14.6**	**14.1**	**15.8**	**18.0**	**18.1**
No post-school qualifications	65.0	62.1	59.1	N/A	58.9	55.7	51.5	N/A	N/A

Source: ABS (1991–2001, second release; 2006, first release).

What is immediately apparent is the increase in qualifications in all areas, and (for 1991–2001) a decline in the proportion of the population with no post-school qualifications.

Overall increases in VET qualifications are large, with increases in total VET qualifications in both the Riverina and New South Wales. In 2006, the Riverina exhibited a higher proportion of the population with VET qualifications, and a lower proportion of tertiary qualifications, than either New South Wales or Australia.

Within the VET sector there have been major changes. The proportion of males with certificate III (mainly trade) or IV qualifications has increased. The number of females with similar level VET qualifications has also increased quite dramatically, with around a 6% increase for New South Wales and around 9% for the Riverina (table 4).

[2] As noted above, there is a series change for the 2006 data and comparisons of this with the earlier series should be limited to an indication of trends rather than changes in absolute values.

Table 4 Highest post-school qualifications, by sex, Riverina Region and NSW, 1991–2006

	Riverina Region				New South Wales			
	1991	1996	2001	2006	1991	1996	2001	2006
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Males								
Advanced diploma/diploma	3.0	4.1	3.6	4.7	3.8	5.6	5.5	7.4
VET qualifications:								
Certificate III & IV	18.0	19.4	22.4	27.8	19.3	19.2	21.3	24.8
Certificate I & II	2.3	2.0	1.5	1.2	2.7	2.2	1.7	1.0
Total VET	**20.4**	**21.4**	**23.9**	**28.9**	**22.0**	**21.4**	**22.9**	**25.9**
Females								
Advanced diploma/diploma	6.7	7.1	5.3	7.7	6.6	7.4	7.0	10.4
VET qualifications:								
Certificate III & IV	2.0	2.5	6.0	10.9	2.3	2.9	5.4	8.4
Certificate I & II	5.2	4.3	3.6	2.8	5.1	4.3	3.7	2.0
Total VET	**7.2**	**6.8**	**9.8**	**10.5**	**7.4**	**7.1**	**9.1**	**10.4**

Source: ABS (1991–2001, second release; 2006, first release).

There are two general explanations for this increase in qualification levels.

The first is demographic. Older workers, who are least likely to have post-school qualifications, reach retirement, and the proportion of younger workers with post-school qualifications increases. This leads to an overall increase in the total proportion of the workforce with recognised formal qualifications. Older female workers are less likely to have formal qualifications than older male workers, and so their retirement contributes to the rising proportion of female workers with qualifications.

The second reason reflects the overall increase in education and training effort over the past couple of decades and the higher qualification levels required for many occupations. For example, nursing, which previously resembled an apprenticeship with on-the-job training in teaching hospitals, now requires either a degree or VET certification. Teachers are now primarily trained through a four-year degree. In the past, particularly in primary education, teachers often gained a diploma qualification offered through a teachers' college (with university affiliation and degree option, particularly for high school teachers), or through one of the former ACE providers.

It is significant that these areas, in which employment has increased with the shift from manufacturing to the service industries, are also sectors with high proportional female employment.

The increase in nationally recognised training and, in particular, the growth in traineeships, both for new and existing workers has increased the number of people with formal VET qualifications. The effects on the Riverina are summarised in the next section.

Nationally recognised training

National VET statistics have clearly shown long-term increases in VET training, and in particular participation in nationally recognised training since the early 1990s. State data for New South Wales are particularly useful because they make a distinction (understood very well in industry) of the difference between traditional apprenticeships and traineeships, irrespective of notional certificate level.

Table 5 Number of original applications approved: Trend data—calendar years, 1998–2007

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Riverina Region										
Apprenticeships	741	754	881	788	839	803	1 097	1 160	1 193	1 238
Traineeships	1 514	1 750	2 399	2 935	2 991	3 147	2 813	2 467	2 860	2 748
Existing worker traineeships	0	313	1 161	1 386	1 605	1 111	1 000	1 006	876	916
Total	**2 255**	**2 817**	**4 441**	**5 109**	**5 435**	**5 061**	**4 910**	**4 633**	**4 929**	**4 902**
New South Wales										
Apprenticeships	12 979	14 999	14 658	13 698	13 420	15 020	18 964	18 488	18 441	19 892
Traineeships	16 718	21 650	31 617	36 744	38 298	41 459	38 245	35 020	35 428	39 604
Existing worker traineeships	0	9 870	12 817	14 908	17 252	21 481	19 292	20 163	21 695	22 087
Total	**29 697**	**46 519**	**59 092**	**65 350**	**69 070**	**77 960**	**76 501**	**73 671**	**75 564**	**81 583**

Source: IVETS database.

Table 5 shows that the demand for traditional apprenticeships in the Riverina Region has in fact *increased* in the period for which data are available, rising from 741 original approvals in 1998 to 1238 in 2007, an increase of 67%. There is a similar increase for New South Wales as a whole, where approvals rose from 12 979 in 1998 to 19 892 in 2007, an increase of around 53%.

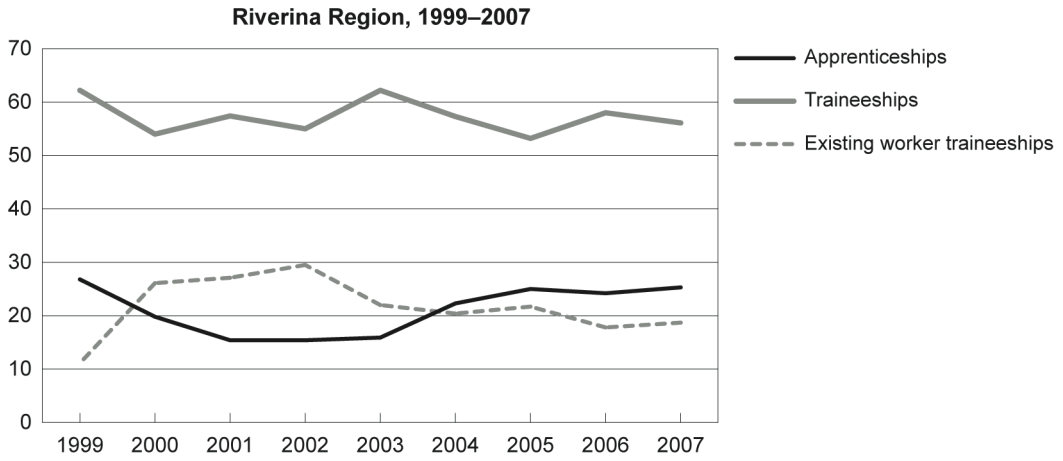
This clearly points to the continued importance of apprenticeship as a preferred route (by both industry and individuals) to the supply of skilled labour, notwithstanding the increases in employment in the service industry. While apprenticeships remain crucial to skill formation in the Riverina (with informants in the qualitative components of the research stressing ongoing regional skill shortages in the trades), the increase in traineeships has important regional significance. Table 5 indicates that new entrant traineeship numbers increased from 1514 approvals in 1998 to 2748 in 2007, a rise of 82%. For New South Wales the equivalent figures were 16 718 in 1998 to 39 604 in 2007, a rise of 137%. Although there are some fluctuations from year to year, the trend shows that the overall demand for traineeships is even stronger for the Riverina than for the state as a whole.

Figures 1 and 2 show the proportion of apprentice, trainee and existing worker traineeship approvals for each calendar year. Of particular note is the fact that each year the Riverina has a higher proportion of new entrant traineeship approvals than New South Wales, and also higher peaks in individual years.

The relative significance of new entrant traineeships is not matched however by the situation with existing worker traineeships. Following their introduction in 1999, existing worker traineeships peaked in the Riverina from 2000 to 2002 and have declined since this time. This is in contrast to the rest of New South Wales, where the total existing worker traineeships have remained fairly stable, or slightly increased over the last ten years. The reason for this is not immediately apparent, although the peak in existing worker traineeship approvals around 2002 in the Riverina may indicate a saturation of the need for this type of training, given the relatively small number of large firms where the majority of this type of training takes place.

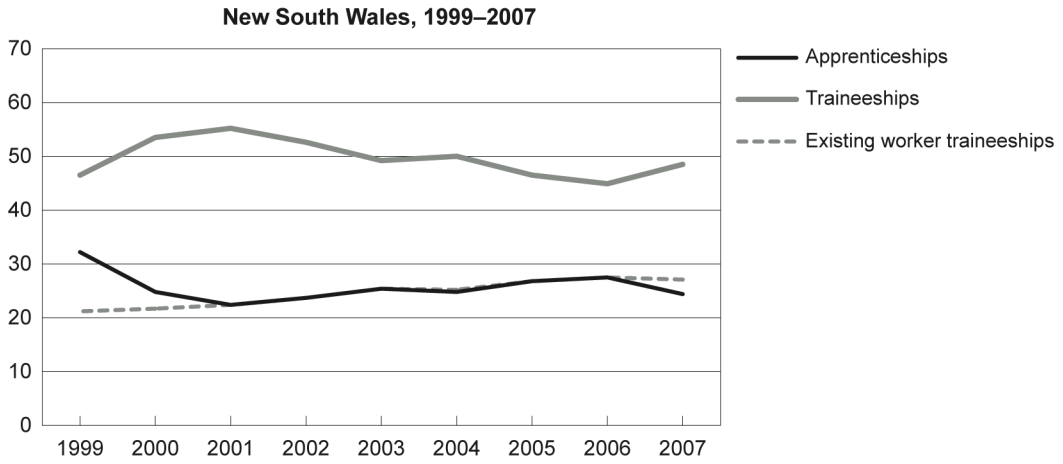
Overall, a broad picture shows some general similarities with national and state-level trends, but with some specific differences that reflect different industry and occupational structures. This is most significant with respect to the greater reliance on VET skills and qualifications in the Riverina Region compared with metropolitan areas. However, even within the region, overall trends can mask local variation. The large regional centres—Wagga Wagga/Leeton/Griffith—with their more diversified economic bases are more similar to national and state averages than the region as a whole.

Figure 1 Apprentice, trainee and existing worker traineeship approvals: Trend data as a percentage of total apprentice and traineeship approvals, time series



Source: IVETS database.

Figure 2 Apprentice, trainee and existing worker traineeship approvals: Trend data as a percentage of total apprentice and traineeship approvals, time series



Source: IVETS database.

There are also differences amongst these regional centres. Wagga Wagga, for example, is a transport distribution centre with significant manufacturing and heavy vehicle service and repair firms, whereas the manufacturing and wholesale trade sectors of Leeton/Griffith are more directed to servicing agricultural production, in particular the wine industry and other horticultural sectors dependent on irrigation. The drought and the effect of this on the supply of irrigation water in 2008 and beyond are likely to have a long-term effect on horticultural and downstream industries and flow onto support services.

In summary, there is sufficient regional variation in demographic, geographic, industry and occupational structures and sufficient differences from state and national averages to suggest that both need and demand should be transmitted in such a way that training providers can take account of local industry requirements, including the maintenance of traditional areas of training. Given the often small potential student numbers involved, this is a challenge when providers are subject to cost pressures that affect the ability to deliver capital-intensive courses, and the limitation of price signals in a 'training market' which emphasise immediate training *demand* rather than long-term training *need*.

Discussion and conclusion

In many ways the project's main conclusion points to the obvious. When people interact in a manner that combines social and professional networking through regular formal and informal meetings in a variety of workplace, community and social settings, opportunities may be created. These opportunities may result in the communication of a range of commercially utilisable knowledge, including VET issues of supply and demand. Although these interactions occur in both urban and rural and regional settings, it appears from the research that 'in the bush' relatively smaller population centres produce a greater concentration of professional and employer networks.

According to modern economic growth theory this social and professional co-mingling may include individual or collective interactions that influence another individual or group without the exchange of money. Sometimes called 'intellectual spillovers' or information flows unmediated by the market (Breschi & Lissoni 2000), these non-market mechanisms are considered mandatory for economic progress (Glaeser 2000). Essentially a form of social networking linked to increasing human and social capital (Falk & Kirkpatrick 2000) as well as community efficacy, non-market mechanisms are the binding social and interpersonal interactions linking work and community, and made more transparent in rural and regional settings.

The glue binding these intellectual spillovers or 'non-price signals' is trust. Information gleaned from focus groups, key informants, site visits and desktop research consistently demonstrated trust, defined as the micro-observable and mutually accountable reciprocity of needs, as the basis of informal and most formal communications of VET need and demand. This was particularly evident in the informal contact between employers and providers, where a known provider staff member, usually with trade or discipline-based expertise, was targeted for information about course supply or capacity to meet employer needs. Similarly, employers may contact trusted sources in schools or the community for suitable trainees within their industries.

Although effective, the dilemma with informal and trust-based communication is its randomness. This situation, combined with regional VET providers' wariness of working cooperatively with competitors because of market considerations, including the disclosure of commercially sensitive material, may potentially lead to poorer training and employment outcomes for employers and trainees alike. A task, then, remains for regional communities, the VET sector and its stakeholders to harness or formalise the networking possibilities of trust-based capacity-building and bring together all stakeholders for mutual community benefit. In a limited way some of the region's government-funded business-promotion bodies have mediated training access through advice given to existing and new enterprises, and trainees.

Greater success in bringing together communities, VET providers, employers and trainees for mutual benefit has been enjoyed in Victoria in its region-based 'learning towns' experiment, developed on similar programs in the United Kingdom. According to Wong (2004), the challenge of assembling competing providers and their local and regional communities can largely be overcome by placing all parties together in a 'neutral space', or independent site. This space is managed, facilitated or mediated by local government, which is entrusted with managing a community-based group to provide information and access to potential clients. Wong's study of Geelong, Victoria, is an excellent example of this process. Waterhouse, Virgona and Brown (2006) similarly endorse the central role of effective coordination to facilitate viable community learning synergies. Within specific organisational contexts, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) have

defined this idea as 'communities of practice', or 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (p.4). Within the project, this captures the essence of what is meant and intended by community-based social capital and capacity-building (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000, p.87), while acknowledging also the realities of 'the bottom line' of VET provider and enterprise markets (Anderson 2005).

VET providers and stakeholders could make better use of readily available statistical databases to suggest emerging areas of demand. A preliminary descriptive statistics approach has been applied to New South Wales and the Riverina using data from the ABS census and the Integrated Vocational Education and Training System maintained by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. Analysis of the data suggests the appearance of demand trends similar to those across the nation but mediated by the contingencies of local factors such as the drought and regional industrial and agricultural focuses. Application of this approach to the region should provide powerful supplementary tools for the anticipation of future demand and a description of past trends. Given the lead times required for the supply of apprentices and other skilled workers, such an approach may prevent local industries being 'caught short' in times when additional skilled workers are required. The release of 2006 census data, combined with previous data collections, will provide a simple yet powerful tool for provider and stakeholder application.

Unlike studies undertaking research in multiple regional sites, the single-site research focus of this project enabled the researchers to explore one area in depth and therefore gain additional detailed insights into regional practices. The researchers have introduced the concept of the 'VET outlier'—marginalised VET sector participants not directly or currently involved with VET providers or community partnerships and who are difficult to access through conventional 'snowballing' or 'drilling down' interview techniques.

In conclusion, the project is offered as an introduction to researching the field of informal mechanisms as a mode of signalling training needs to VET providers. The case study of the Riverina as a single instance of regional VET supply and demand challenges is necessarily limited in its capacity to make confident generalisations to other regions; however, it is offered as a model for future larger studies that may extend these insights.

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Appendix A: Interview questions

Interview questions have been created for four separate groups:

1. *key informants* identified through membership of representative bodies or positions in the provider system, including government departments, VET providers and organised labour
2. *'matched' interviewees* suggested by key informants (suggesting further key informants, or clients or organisations using the services of VET providers)
3. *focus groups* made up of business and professional sector representatives drawn from organisations such as Rotary and Chambers of Commerce and Industry
4. *individual clients* of VET providers suggested by key informants, VET providers or focus groups.

Although the interview questions will be similar for each group, they have been separated according to the audiences suggested. Interviews will be conducted face to face using a researcher and notetaker. Interviews are scheduled for 45 minutes to one hour.

1. Key informants (questions will be adjusted according to the informant and her/his organisation)

1. Could you please tell us something about your organisation and your current role within it?
2. Outline how your organisation works with or within the VET sector.
3. Do you have formal policies relating to your VET sector relationships?
4. What types of VET-related clients does your organisation deal with?
5. How do your clients communicate training needs to your organisation?
6. How do you communicate training supply/demand to the VET clients/VET providers?
7. Can this communication be improved?
8. Could you please give us some examples of the VET-related requests made to your organisation?
9. How do you respond to VET-related requests to your organisation?
10. Do you have any formal relationships or networks with VET providers or related government departments and business and professional associations?
11. What do you believe your organisation can do to improve its communication with VET providers or related government departments and business and professional associations?
12. Can you suggest further people or organisations we need to talk to in order to gain a better picture or how need and demand is communicated to VET providers?

2. 'Matched' interviewees (organisational key informants will be given the questions from '1' above)

1. Could you please tell us something about yourself and how you have been made aware of the services provided by the VET sector?
2. Could you please detail the service and services you have received from VET providers?
3. What kinds of services do you want from VET providers?
4. Do you believe VET providers meet your needs?
5. If not, how would you communicate those needs to your local VET providers?
6. Would you communicate to them examples of good/bad service?
7. What do you believe VET providers need to do in order to add to the services they provide?
8. Can you suggest further people or organisations we need to talk to in order to gain a better picture or how need and demand is communicated to VET providers?

3. Focus groups

1. Could you please tell us something about yourself, your business and how you have been made aware of the services provided by the VET sector?
2. Could you please detail the service and services you have received from VET providers?
3. What kinds of services do you want from VET providers?
4. Do you believe VET providers meet your needs?
5. If not, how would you communicate those needs to your local VET providers?
6. Would you communicate to them examples of good/bad service?
7. What do you believe VET providers need to do in order to add to the services they provide?
8. Does your organisation communicate to VET providers its issues about VET provision?
9. If so, how does it do this?
10. Can you suggest further people or organisations we need to talk to in order to gain a better picture or how need and demand is communicated to VET providers?

4. Individual clients (drawn from 1, 2 and 3 above as appropriate)

1. Could you please tell us something about yourself and how you have been made aware of the services provided by the VET sector?
2. Could you please detail the service and services you have received from VET providers?
3. What kinds of services do you want from VET providers?
4. Do you believe VET providers meet your needs?
5. If not, how would you communicate those needs to your local VET providers?
6. Would you communicate to them examples of good/bad service?
7. What do you believe VET providers need to do in order to add to the services they provide?
8. Can you suggest further people or organisations we need to talk to in order to gain a better picture or how need and demand is communicated to VET providers?

Appendix B: Information sheet

Information sheet for National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) funded project: *Communicating regional training need and demand to Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers*

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About the project:

The NCVER project focuses on the processes, and in particular non-market mechanisms, through which training needs are communicated or signalled to Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers in rural settings. Qualitative data will be gathered through interviewing a range of regional VET providers, employers, community groups and VET clients. Supporting quantitative and research information will be used to provide an additional context to the project.

The project addresses the following five questions:

1. How is information about training needs (demand) transmitted to VET providers in rural and regional environments?
2. What is the role of regional and community groups in transmitting training needs to VET providers; and in transmitting information about VET supply back to their communities?
3. How accurate is the information, and how effective is the communication process?
4. How integrated are different sectors of the VET system in practice integrated into their communities?
5. What are the concrete arrangements that would improve information transfer between VET clients and the VET system in regional communities?

Research informants will be briefed prior to interview about the nature of the project and the ethical issues involved. All data collected will be confidential and every effort made to ensure that individual identities will not be disclosed. Data will be kept in a secure environment and destroyed within five years of the project's completion in July 2007. All research participants have the option to withdraw at any time from the research process. Informants may request to be kept informed of the project's progress and outcomes.

The project directly addresses Objective 3 of the National VET Strategy: 'Communities and regions will be strengthened economically and socially through learning and employment.' The project was approved for NCVER funding because of its focus on a 'gap' in the research literature suggested by this objective. Addressing this gap through researching how training need non-market mechanisms are communicated to VET providers will contribute to the available knowledge informing national, state and regional decision and policy making.

The project will also provide a contribution to current VET sector knowledge. Outcomes will include a published report, website data, and a range of conference papers and journal articles.

I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Executive Officer
Ethics in Human Research Committee
The Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
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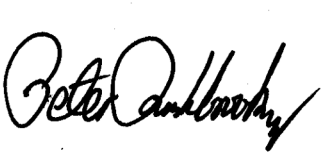
Phone:(02) 6338 4628
Fax: (02) 6338 4194



Dr Peter Rushbrook

February 2007

The National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program is coordinated and managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

This program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector.

Research funding is awarded to organisations via a competitive grants process.

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