



# Making research matter

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RESEARCH

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# About the research

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## *Making research matter*

Francesca Beddie

This paper considers the role of evidence in public policy and how research can contribute to better policies and innovations in practice. It formed the basis of a keynote address given by the author at the inaugural Vocational Training and Education Research and Networking Conference, hosted by the Regional Centre for Vocational and Technical Education and Training of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation in Bali in July 2008.

*Making research matter* argues that the right institutional and cultural settings need to be in place before the research can play its proper role in policy-making.

## Key messages

- ✧ The vast growth in the volume and access to information in the twenty-first century presents opportunities to applied research organisations. They can assume the role of knowledge-brokers—the people who sift through the vast, confusing mass of information, and help others, politicians and citizens alike, to make sense of it.
- ✧ In addition to the typical skills researchers bring to their craft, those aiming to influence policy must develop a good understanding of the context in which their work may be used, especially political awareness. These attributes must, however, be balanced against rigorous and independent research.
- ✧ Evaluations have a place in applied research programs. To be effective in informing policy and practice, they need to be frank about failures as well as successes. This requires a greater tolerance of risk than prevails in Australian policy and research circles.
- ✧ Clearly articulated research findings, which are disseminated in a timely fashion, will also increase the impact of research efforts and, in turn, help to establish the parameters in which research is embraced as a policy tool.

Tom Karmel  
Managing Director, NCVER

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## Introduction

Australia has a new government, led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who has signalled a determination not only to introduce his Labor Party's policies, but also to change the way government works. Part of that plan concerns evidence. In April, he told Australia's most senior public servants that: 'Policy innovation and evidence-based policy-making is at the heart of being a reformist government.' And a little later in the same speech, he declared: 'Innovation can help us deliver better policy and better outcomes for the whole community' (Rudd 2008).

That should be good news for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), especially as another aspect of the Rudd reform agenda is the transformation of education and skilling in Australia.

NCVER is a not-for-profit company owned by the Australian federal, state and territory ministers responsible for training. Its role is collecting, managing, analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training (VET).

NCVER's vision is for policy and practice in vocational education and training to be based on sound evidence. Its mission is to be Australia's leading provider of quality, independent information relating to vocational education and training to governments, the sector, industry, and the community.

What Prime Minister Rudd is looking for is 'a culture of policy innovation', which trials new approaches and policy options through small-scale pilot studies. And in the spirit of collaborative federalism—another plank of his revolution—he sees such work being done with state governments, business, research centres or community groups. Again, good news for NCVER, as all such organisations are already our partners.

These ideas are reflected in the Rudd Government's initiative to establish a new body, Skills Australia, whose role will be to:

- analyse current and emerging skills needs in the Australian economy
- assess evidence from commissioned research and industry stakeholders to inform Australia's workforce development needs
- widely distribute information from research and consultations with stakeholders to enable entrepreneurs, businesses and workers to have the necessary information to inform their training and employment decisions
- provide the federal government with recommendations on current and future skills needs to help inform decisions that encourage skills formation and drive ongoing reforms to the education and training sector, including setting priorities for the investment of public funds
- establish and maintain relationships with relevant state bodies and authorities to inform its advice on current and future demand for skills and facilitate alignment of priorities for responses to skills needs.

(Australian Parliament House 2008)

Skills Australia is a small body, comprising seven experts drawn from industry, academia and the training sector. One of Australia's most prominent VET researchers, Professor Gerald Burke, is a member.

The establishment of such an organisation reflects the challenges society faces in adapting to the knowledge economy. We researchers can take heart that, despite the ready access to so much information, we will not be rendered obsolete. Rather, we have more work than ever to do,

including taking on the task of becoming knowledge-brokers, the people who sift through the vast, confusing mass of information, and help others—politicians and citizens alike—make sense of it.

This role has been acknowledged by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Its 2007 report, *Evidence in education: Linking research and policy*, notes that increased access to information via the internet comes at the cost of less quality control and goes on to argue that ‘the role of research for evidence-informed policy is becoming newly important’ (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 2007, p.18). Consequently, research organisations, able to analyse the data and sift out the detritus from the information mass, will assume greater responsibility as knowledge-brokers.

Let me make these thoughts more concrete by borrowing words from the Canadian Council on Learning, which has argued that better information in our sector can help:

- learners to make the best educational choices to achieve their personal goals
- training institutions to ensure they have the programs and capacity to meet student demand
- employers to have more information about how skills can help their business
- governments to assess how to invest taxpayers’ money most effectively.

(Canadian Council on Learning 2006)

Back to Australia. Our government is exhorting us to be brave: to say what we think; to *think*, not feel or want; to report candidly the findings and analysis of our work; to evaluate what works and what doesn’t—honestly; and to learn from our mistakes. For this to be effective, it will require a new level of tolerance for frank discussion.

That is a big job, especially for risk-averse public servants, used to keeping the bad news to themselves, and taking directions from ministers rather than convincing them of policy options. It also demands courageous politicians, prepared to take unpopular decisions.

In our system, politicians—elected by the people—make policy. That makes it a complicated process and a competitive one. Politicians want to be re-elected. Constituents are increasingly sophisticated in pushing their issues. This presents those politicians in government with the challenge of weighing up all the claims and—ideally—making decisions based on national, not partisan, interest.

The rising price of oil demonstrates the difficulties facing policy-makers. In Indonesia—as in Australia, the United States and many other countries—we are witnessing the backlash that rational policies on fuel subsidies can provoke, and the clash between personal hardship and national, indeed global, wellbeing. People do not always respond to rational argument—even, as in the case of oil, when we know we are dealing with a finite resource. That can make the presentation of the evidence a tricky business.

For a system of evidence-based policy to have the desired effect—that is, to promote better decisions on what to do and where to spend money—I would argue there must first be a consensus on the importance and nature of research. We need to establish parameters when we champion the notion of the contestability of ideas.

In the world of politics, advocacy has a place. The representation of a point of view, backed by facts and figures—‘research’—is part of contestability. But we all know that statistics can lie and clever words are not necessarily truthful ones. This can lead to a great deal of suspicion about lobby groups. The ideas market becomes so competitive that objectivity is abandoned to spin and partisanship. Impartial research has a hard job competing in this environment. It requires careful navigation of political waters.

One way NCVER strives to retain its independence, while also serving its owners, is through consultation with all those involved in vocational education and training: governments, providers, employers and learners. This is reflected in the membership of our Board, which includes nominees of industry, the unions, federal and state governments.

In 2007, we undertook a major consultation process to determine national research priorities. This involved issuing a discussion paper—to which 22 organisations and seven individuals responded—as well as meetings with 25 interested parties. The consultations found widespread support for limiting the number of research priorities to no more than five, and strongly concentrating the research effort in those areas. Those involved felt that the priorities should guide research activities through to 2010, as long as there was scope to deal with any new issues that might emerge. Stakeholders wished to see research activities closely aligned with and supporting the strategic directions of the sector, especially those being progressed through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). It was argued that research should support these national agendas by:

- identifying interventions and programs that work
- demonstrating the benefits and impact of reform
- developing a better understanding of the costs and benefits of various reform initiatives
- determining the impediments to reform implementation and concomitant strategies for overcoming these impediments.

A set of priorities was drafted and put to the ministers responsible for training, who endorsed them in June 2007:

1. *Growing the labour supply*: by examining how VET can support greater participation in the workforce, especially for equity groups whose participation is relatively low.

2. *Motivating individuals to participate in VET*: by understanding why people choose to, or not to, participate in VET, what drives demand for VET and what outcomes it offers participants in the medium to long term.

3. *Sustaining a skills base through apprenticeships and traineeships*: by identifying ways of maximising the number of people who complete their apprenticeship or traineeship.

4. *Enhancing the productive capacity of enterprises*: by ensuring that employers are well-placed to maintain the skills of their workers and to adapt to new work practices and technologies.

5. *Enabling VET providers to compete effectively*: by identifying the barriers VET providers face to operating effectively in a competitive environment.

(NCVER 2007)

As you can see, these topics are broad enough to allow an array of research activities and to accommodate new policy directions, such as the present Australian Government's emphasis on social inclusion.

Despite the intensive work NCVER put into consulting about these priorities, there is a tendency to see these as 'owned' either by us or by the government, rather than by all those involved in the sector. This suggests that we have more work to do in building the common understanding of the role of research in public policy. One of the ways we strive to do this is by continuing to produce research that is relevant, interesting and sound.

In Australia, this job is complicated by the emergence of ‘think tanks’ in recent years. Many of these have explicit political orientations or specific issues, such as climate change, that govern their operations and the slant of their research activities. Some, however, are developing a more impartial stance as independent applied research centres, taking as their models the best from the American tradition of think tanks.

Notable among these is the Lowy Institute for International Policy, which has recently celebrated its fifth birthday. The institute’s main benefactor is Frank Lowy, one of Australia’s wealthiest businessmen. Its inaugural executive director, Allan Gyngell, reflected in late May on how think tanks can make governments better and societies more vibrant:

1. They help *structure the public debate*, by providing an alternative source of well-considered views, which, Gyngell stressed, should serve to complicate (that is, enrich) the policy debate. In other words, take the opposite path from politicians, whose job is to pare things back, so that voters get the message, usually conveyed, I would add, through the 30-second grab on TV. (In a debate about an OECD examination of education research in England, Edwin Keiner makes the same point, arguing that educational research ‘enriches diverse perspectives and breaks with common assumptions and opinions and makes them relative, i.e. it increases knowledge complexity which, then, might be reduced by political decisions’ [Roundtable at ECER 2003, p.515].)
2. They *improve the quality of that public debate* by anchoring it in evidence. Their research is often different from that produced by scholarly institutions, being shaped more heavily by the parameters of public policy.
3. Think tanks *produce specific new ideas*. They are nimble and responsive to developments in the world and at their best they can act quickly to develop ideas and ‘sell’ them.
4. Think tanks can *undertake useful ventures* that are impossible for governments. They can float ideas that are too risky for governments; they can more easily bring together groups with different interests to work through problems; and they can facilitate more informal and indirect channels of communication.

(Gyngell 2008, pp.5–6)

Research organisations such as NCVER and others represented at this conference do similar things, although being nimble and daring are no easy feats, especially when confronted by the risks of retribution if the ideas do not match the prevailing winds. This is why we need a social contract between governments, researchers, the media and advocacy groups that encourages new and different thinking, while making clear the boundaries for this evidence-based approach and the action required to support it. This calls for work on both sides of the evidence-based policy coin: the generators of the evidence and the consumers.

It is no secret that much of the Australian Government’s thinking has been influenced by that of New Labour in Britain. The Centre for Management and Policy Studies in the British Cabinet Office outlined the tasks, from a policy perspective, which the government should undertake to achieve a reinvigorated approach to policy-making. These included:

- developing and encouraging an approach to policy-making which draws on evidence and runs across departmental boundaries
- evaluating new approaches to policy-making and public management, and identifying and promoting best practice, wherever it may be found
- training and developing public sector managers based on this leading-edge thinking.

(Bullock & Mountford 2001, p.3)

These three points raise some big challenges; not only to civil servants, but also to people involved in the management of applied research aimed at influencing policy. I will examine these

challenges from a research management point of view, focusing on some of the difficulties we need to overcome if we are to contribute to good policy-making.

## Evidence-based policy: Where does the research fit?

The first is the question of relevance and timeliness of research designed to provide the evidence base for policy. How can we gather the evidence and compile it and distribute it to the right people in the right timeframe for it to be useful? Part of the answer is that we cannot, and should not, squeeze research into other timetables. This does not mean ignoring them. As research managers, we need to be aware of policy settings and developments, and of the mechanisms of government. In Australia, for instance, if you want to influence budget deliberations, you need to feed ideas into the public service before the end of the calendar year, five months before the budget is delivered in May.

And, as the disseminators for research, we have to acknowledge that no one has time for contemplation. I believe that this malaise of modern society is having a profound and debilitating effect on good policy-making. Too few people have time to think, to read, to discuss. Certainly, public servants and politicians are so time-poor that we have to learn to package sophisticated research findings into one quickly digestible page. That page cannot say it all. What it must do is entice the reader to delve further, to be convinced that finding the time or delegating the task of reading the executive summary or even the full report will be worthwhile.

It would also be remiss of me not to mention here my main daily problem—getting researchers to meet deadlines. Many of the researchers NCVET commissions are academics. They carry multiple workloads, requiring them to teach and win more tenders, as well as to conduct research. Without direct experience of the public service, they do not fully appreciate the rhythm of government and why deadlines can be crucial.

More importantly, sometimes a limited understanding of how government works can translate into a natural suspicion and defensiveness or unrealistic expectations of the impact a researcher might have. Furthermore, many academics find it difficult to communicate their ideas to a lay audience, albeit an intelligent and influential one. But perhaps most disturbing is that this distance from government means researchers can find it hard to come up with research questions that will stretch policy-makers' thinking. The question is fundamental to the research process, and when it comes to the sort of applied research we are talking about, it will also have a profound influence on the impact of the research.

The mantra of many governments these days is the need to have a joined-up or whole-of-government approach. This is sensible but hard to implement, not least because of competing priorities (but also because of personal and professional rivalries), which require agencies to argue against each other for their slice of the budget. In addition, there are cultural differences within the public service; for example, between the way central agencies such as Treasury, and implementing ones such as Education, see the world.

One way of trying to break down these barriers is to institute the practice—more familiar in the United States than elsewhere—of greater exchanges between people working in and outside the bureaucracy. This would give those outside—for example, in academia or industry—first-hand knowledge of government processes, while allowing public servants the opportunity to reflect on their practice at a university for a while or to experience the way a training provider or business operates.

Similarly, interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary or just different disciplinary research must be fostered. The silo mentality is alive and well in education. Even with the popularity of the concept of lifelong learning, it is proving extraordinarily difficult to create seamless pathways for learners that allow them to get the skills and knowledge they require from the right type of institution or

approach. Across the world we see this institutional battle being fought in the post-secondary arena, with the concept of one tertiary field of education still a long way off. The same divisions persist among researchers.

At NCVER, we are trying to encourage different ways of seeing vocational education—we want business schools and labour economists, as well as technical and vocational education and training (TVET) specialists, to scrutinise the problems the training sector is confronting.

In 2007, in order to further improve the quality of our commissioned research, we took a different approach by entering into three-year contracts for a program of work aligned to the national priorities. This meant we could offer substantial sums of money, allowing the universities to plan ahead and engage younger researchers to carry through the work, and to build expertise in the vocational education area.

## Evaluation

Let me now turn to the issues of evaluation, best practice and lessons learned, raised in the second bullet point identified by the Centre for Management and Policy Studies.

Do we do enough rigorous analysis of what goes wrong? In a previous role, I worked in the Australian aid agency. That's where I first saw the enormous intellectual effort put into development activity. The array and depth of that thinking still astonishes and stimulates me, but I also saw how difficult it was to transform that effort into practice. Aid is a risky business. It is likely to have failures as well as successes. Yet, we see lessons remain unlearned and mistakes repeated.

We know, for example, that adult literacy is a big problem around the globe. We also know, from an evaluation carried out by the World Bank's Operations Evaluation Department, that almost total reliance on volunteer tutors is not sufficient to ensure that adults receive the best literacy tuition (Abadzi 2003, p.1). As research which NCVER has published also shows, these tutors need strong support so that they have the relevant expertise to teach (Dymock 2007). Yet, we continue to see undue reliance on, and underfunding of, volunteers in adult literacy circles in developed and developing countries alike. This suggests that the research has yet to have sufficient impact on adult literacy programming. That is no criticism of the evaluations themselves but points to the need for a public policy environment that is receptive to tough messages.

As researchers, we need to be careful about what we evaluate. It is good practice to build an evaluation into all programs: the OECD recommends 1.5 per cent of the overall program budget. The question then arises as to who should conduct such evaluations. When it comes to public programs, it is governments themselves that should fund evaluations, ensuring that the evaluator is independent from the delivery agency and that findings are accorded the proper treatment.

In the commissioned research at NCVER, called the National VET Research and Evaluation Program, we prefer not to fund narrow evaluations—this component should already be part of the overall project plan. Rather, we are interested in analyses that identify broader lessons of relevance to others in the sector, and which go beyond evaluating process, to measuring impact.

We get very few proposals that suggest we should learn from mistakes, reflecting probably the risk-averse approach that prevails in most public sector activity and perhaps also a bias in research towards the positive. This can lead to a lack of variety in the examination of difficult areas of public policy, to an endless rehearsal of the same issues rather than to fresh approaches and new questions. If governments are going to operate from a strong evidence base, they must not only be prudent about the dollars they spend, but also willing, when deciding to fund pilots, to tolerate failure. They also need to encourage openness about what works and what doesn't and

what factors we should emulate and what we should discard. That is what experimentation is all about. But outside the laboratory, it takes particular courage to admit mistakes.

## Training and development of end users

The third point raised by the Centre was the need for training and development of public sector managers. This is an important issue. I have argued elsewhere (Beddie 2007) for greater attention to an historical way of thinking within government, one which encourages long-term approaches and can alleviate the perennial problem of a poor institutional memory. As the Centre points out, policy-makers ‘require grounding in economics, statistics and relevant scientific disciplines in order to act as “intelligent” customers for complex policy evidence’ (Bullock & Mountford 2001, p.12). The word ‘customer’ in this sentence should reassure you. I think there is little danger that policy officers are about to take over our jobs. Instead, if they can become more savvy about using research, their appetite for it will grow. The very early indications are, for instance, that Skills Australia will wish to draw on the work undertaken and commissioned by NCVER.

The Southeast Asian Vocational Education Research Network (SEAVERN) in the 11 SEAMEO member countries has an important role in demonstrating the benefits of research to public sector managers in the region. It also has a vested interest in doing so, for it is only realistic to expect that it will be public funds that underpin evidence-based policy-making. In turn, it is not unreasonable for policy-makers to expect research to be useful and relevant, and digestible.

This is easier said than done. Utility and relevance are not absolutes; the end users of research may measure these things differently from each other and with a perspective different from that of the researcher.

Moreover, much remains to be said for pure research not influenced by pragmatic or ideological concerns. We must keep the spirit of curiosity and imagination alive in our research institutions. I think we can do this more effectively if there is broad agreement that generating rigorous independent research is a public good, one which lays the groundwork for healthy debate and decision-making.

At a more practical level, your networks can make a valuable contribution to the training of end users. Many of these will not be familiar with the ways good research is conducted and may be daunted by the statistician’s mind and method. By giving people a better understanding of how data are collected and analysed, we can increase confidence in its results. We also have an obligation to those we involve in research—learners, hard-pressed teachers, busy employers. That is where codes of ethics can help. In addition to ensuring that the subjects of research are well treated, such codes can assist in building confidence in the research (Spicker 2007).

This leads me to underline the importance of rigorous standards for collecting information, the highest attention to accuracy, and to disseminating its results with unambiguous clarity. This will not prevent the numbers becoming tools for the advocates of certain points of view, but will protect the reputation of their source.

In government, data—and the analyses they underpin—are an intrinsic part of the policy-making process. Data provide the foundation of an evidence base which, in turn, enables applied policy research questions to be asked. However, data collection is an expensive business. Here again I think the research community has a role to play in assisting governments to make the hard decisions about what data should be collected. First, researchers can demonstrate the multiple uses to which the same data can be put for the benefit of policy-makers, other researchers, industry and teachers; and, second, they can show how important it is to make a long-term commitment to collecting the information. This means not just presenting the figures and analysing what they are saying, but also training the users in how to read them.

In our case, NCVET has been the main collection agency for VET statistics for 14 years. Recently, we have also taken over management of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), which uses large, nationally representative samples of young people to collect information about their education and training, work, and social development.

For the most part, we enjoy the confidence of our ministerial owners, but one wrong figure can have a powerful, negative effect. That is why we apply the latest technology to our collection, thereby ensuring its accuracy and timeliness.

There is also a role for qualitative and secondary research. A recent NCVET research project, examining the amount of funding employers spend on training, concluded that the survey data were not sufficient to give a picture of employers' attitudes to training. It recommends that the figures, which can identify trends, be supplemented by in-depth case studies to better understand and explain these trends (Burke forthcoming).

I am an historian by training. It is therefore not surprising that I would argue for greater attention to historical influences on institutional and policy directions. These are included in a SEAMEO VOCTECH analysis of when and how vocational education is offered. Dr Paryono's case study analysis concludes that, while there is indeed a strong relationship between vocational education and the economy, it is not economic considerations alone that influence the way in which the sector develops (Paryono 2005). Other factors include socio-cultural attitudes and the way in which organisations have evolved.

NCVET has just commissioned a project which I think will cast light on these influences. It intends to look at the provision of higher education (associate degrees and degree programs) by public VET providers in Australia. In so doing, it will have to tackle an issue not confined to Australia: the poor image of TVET. The authors, Leesa Wheelahan and Gavin Moodie, will draw on their study of developments in England, where attempts to produce a seamless system offering the right training to the right student for the right purpose are in fact reinforcing the divide between vocational and university tertiary education.

In Australia, many of the dual-sector universities—where both VET and university qualifications are on offer—grew out of the educational reforms of the 1980s, when about 60 vocationally oriented colleges and institutes (largely called colleges of advanced education) were transformed into universities, the intention being to offer university places to a much larger number of Australian students. The reform succeeded in this. It did not, however, abolish the perception that to pursue a vocational pathway after school was a lesser option; nor has it removed the hierarchy of status attached to occupations, with trades on a lower rung than the professions.

This dichotomy also presented itself in Singapore. In a survey of education policies in Singapore since 1965, the authors of a background paper for an Asia Education Study Tour show how the legacy of British rule, the drive to achieve economic development and poor communication between policy-makers and teachers resulted in a 'yawning gap between the enrolment in academic and technical streams' (Goh Chor Boon & Gopinathan 2006, p.23). It was not until the late 1980s that the Singapore Government began to seriously tackle the population's aversion to blue-collar jobs and to consider a concerted effort to upgrade vocational and technical education. This shift was driven primarily by economic realities. As Lee Yock Suan, the then Minister of Education, said in June 1994:

Singapore will be poorer if everyone aspires to and gets only academic qualifications but nobody knows how to fix a TV set, a machine tool or a process plant. We need a world-class workforce with a wide variety of knowledge of skills to achieve a world-class standard of living. (quoted in Goh Chor Boon & Gopinathan 2006, p.32)

The latest change in the orientation of Singapore's education policy has been driven by globalisation and has required a considerable shift in mindset—away from an efficiency model to one that fosters innovation and creativity.

## Building researcher capacity

It is these attributes of innovation and creativity that we must also foster among vocational education researchers. Building research capacity is, therefore, a priority for education systems. In considering this task, it is worth thinking about the researcher's craft. For those of us operating within the field of applied research, this includes acquiring an understanding of the context of the application of ideas and an appreciation of how the knowledge we are producing might contribute to efforts to solve problems in our chosen field of study.<sup>1</sup>

NCVER is tackling the issue of research capacity in several ways. I have mentioned that we have introduced bigger commissions, which are designed to attract top-quality researchers. A condition we built into these commissions was the involvement of early career researchers, who would consequently become involved in a three-year program of research into vocational education and training. We are delighted that this tactic has brought quite a few new faces into the field.

We have also introduced a modest scholarship scheme designed to encourage VET practitioners to become more involved in research, either by enrolling at university, or by participating in a community of practice—along with colleagues in other VET institutions—to conduct a more practically oriented project of relevance to their place of work. Applicants in this scheme must have the support of their employers. We hope the results of their projects will demonstrate to the sector the importance of gathering evidence, analysing it and using it to improve teaching, learning and business practices. Time—and solid evaluation of the programs—will tell.

## The impact of research

I would like to end this presentation by drawing out some of its themes and tying them into a project we are conducting at the moment on the impact of NCVER's research. Those themes embrace the various stages of the research process:

- determining the question
- conducting the research
- disseminating the findings.

If research with a remit like ours—influencing policy and practice—is to have impact, it must be seen as relevant by its target audiences. That does not mean it has to match a government policy or program, but it does have to be cognisant of current priorities and of the difficulties educators or industry are facing. It must, at the very least, make a useful contribution to the body of knowledge. Too often, however, research gets stuck in a groove, replaying the problems ad infinitum, but doing little to help with finding the solutions.

Such research must be impartial. It must adopt rigorous methodologies and use reliable data. It must be conducted ethically and be above criticism of bias. It is not advocacy. And, in the words of our managing director, it must be interesting!

Finally, the research must be read or, at least become known. We are not in the business of creating tomes which gather dust on shelves.

In all three phases, research managers play a part. There is much that can be done during the commissioning phase of a research project to make sure the questions are provocative and timely and will lead to interesting research. In Australian VET research, we have our five priority areas

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<sup>1</sup> This is what Michael Gibbons and his colleagues have dubbed Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al. 1994).

that set the directions for publicly funded projects. In addition to these, as we were told by senior policy-makers at an NCVER workshop on research impact, we need to open up an early dialogue with end users that whets their appetites for the final report. Part of that conversation already takes place during NCVER's selection of projects, when there is lively debate about the merits of the research proposals among selection panel members, who are representatives of government, industry, providers and unions.

Project management of research is not merely a functional task. It requires intellectual engagement with the subject matter as well as the strong people skills required to keep researchers on track! Peer review of the work—before it has reached what the author considers is its final, immutable form—is also invaluable to ensuring the quality and reputation of research.

Finally, the dissemination of findings is imperative. This is self-evident, but by no means straightforward. There is much more to do than publish a document. That document—if indeed that is the final product—must be fit-for-purpose. It must talk to its intended audience in their language. For policy-makers, that means short, clear presentation of the findings, with enough context and argument to be convincing. For trainers, the research must demonstrate a practical use and be able to be consumed between classes and administration, and all the other calls on their time. We are trialling the use of podcasts to convey, in particular to this audience, the key messages from our research.

In Australia—and I am sure elsewhere—the VET sector is characterised by strong networks, often made up of people who have known each other for a long time and who have established, informal channels of communications. It pays to get invited into these.

Conferences are a standard means for both information-sharing and networking. Other events are also worth considering. I am keen to bring our researchers together with key policy advisors during the course of the work, as well as at its completion. This, I hope, will overcome some of the obstacles to delivering timely work, by ensuring that both parties are in tune with current thinking.

Another important audience are parliamentarians. Not just ministers, but also backbenchers, whose hard work on committees as well as in their constituencies goes largely unnoticed. The Overseas Development Institute in Britain, voted best think tank of the year in 2007, offers briefings and other events at Westminster. It does this in partnership with a group of parliamentarians interested in development. It is an idea worth replicating.

Measuring the impact of all this effort is a daunting task and one upon which my team at NCVER has recently embarked. It is too early to discuss the findings of our project. I can say, however, that my preliminary impression is that NCVER must think more about its role as knowledge-broker, a job that builds on our reputation as a trusted source of information and of good-quality research and as a good disseminator of these. What I mean here is that through our work collecting, commissioning and publishing research—not to mention running the VOCED database—we should be able to develop the capacity to guide people, policy advisors in particular, to resources they will find useful, but of which they are as yet unaware. The challenge here is to be attuned to what is happening and able to be proactive in offering this service. In addition, we might use this function to encourage more explicit acknowledgement of the sources that influence policy formulation, thus building the concrete evidence of our impact.

I am looking forward very much to the rest of this conference and know I will learn a great deal. It is a pleasure to be among others who share a commitment to research. It is a job worth doing and doing well and one which, despite all the information now sweeping the globe, is becoming no easier. By way of encouragement let me end with the words of Kahlil Gibran:

A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle.

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