



SUPPORTING VET PROVIDERS in building capability for the future

The overview and context of the consortium's research program by Hugh Guthrie

The consortium has undertaken a two-year program of work focused on approaches intended to help VET providers to build their capability. This paper provides an overview of the research program and briefly outlines the key contextual issues of concern to VET stakeholders. The other seven papers address the findings and outcomes of each of the seven specific research activities. A final paper presents a summary of the overall findings and key messages.

The consortium

This research consortium, *Supporting VET providers in building capability for the future*, was formed as part of a national program of VET research funded by the (then) Department of Education, Science and Training¹ and the states and territories and managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

Led by a team of three directors (Roger Harris, Berwyn Clayton and Clive Chappell), the consortium also drew on the expertise of five principal and eight other researchers, a number of whom are based in VET providers. Its research focused on VET workforce and organisational capability issues.

The aims of the consortium's research program

This research program aimed to:

- develop a clearer understanding of the dynamics of the changing VET workplace and the capacity of registered training organisations to respond to the increasingly complex and changing demands of clients
- critically analyse key management, leadership and human resources practices and their applicability for VET providers

- investigate cutting-edge practices in VET that support increased quality, agility and responsiveness
- examine the interrelationships between the development of people, practices and cultures and their impact on the capability of registered training organisations
- generate a diverse range of products and services that can be disseminated widely and used to conduct workforce development workshops at the local level in order to promote individual and organisational capability.

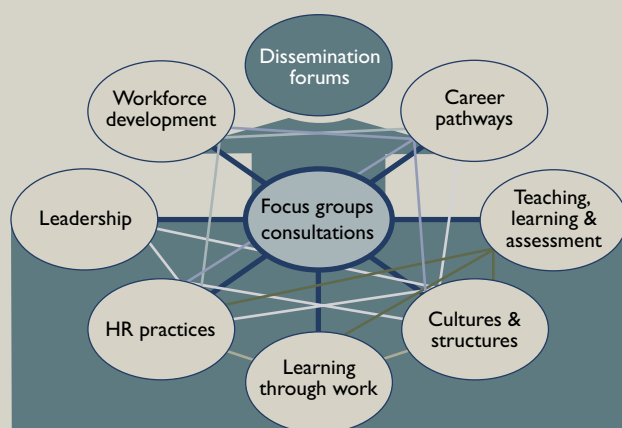
The consortium's approach and research activities

This consortium program began with individual consultations with 57 key stakeholders and structured forums with around 240 VET personnel in all states and territories. The aim of these consultations and forums was to guide and focus the research, which is described below. The activities of the consortium encompassed seven other principal research activities, addressing issues such as career pathways for VET provider staff, teaching and learning, organisational cultures and structures, learning through work, human resource development, leadership and workforce development. An overview of the program and its activities is presented in figure 1.

¹ The Department of Education, Science and Training was abolished in December 2007 and its functions assumed by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

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Figure 1 An integrated program of research



From the first forums: Challenges, demands and imperatives in the VET sector

Participants in the consultations and focus groups held in the program start-up phase came from TAFE institutes, private providers, enterprise registered training organisations, industry bodies, senior secondary schools and state training authorities. The environment in which VET providers operate was described by one participant as a 'turbulent blancmange'. Many reported the negative impact of significant change, although there were also positive views of committed, hard-working and innovative people, and client-focused, responsive and productive organisations, in which change was seen as providing real opportunities. The major drivers of change identified as impacting on daily work include changes in the VET workforce, technology, competition/collaboration, national/state environments and student demands.

Reflecting on how providers might best position themselves to meet emerging demands from individuals, industry and community, participants focused on new structures and ways of working. Common suggestions for meeting these challenges included enhancing industry connections through improved client focus, collaboration and strategic alliances, working in partnerships that ensured provider collaboration rather than competition, and increasing flexibility at both the whole-of-organisation and work-team levels.

Changes to the recruitment, management and training of the VET workforce were seen as key to renewing

provider capability and require the adoption of more strategic approaches to workforce planning. More strategic approaches include managing the tensions inherent to the casualisation of the TAFE workforce, recruiting people with relevant skills and attributes, enhancing flexibility in human resource practices, and developing and maintaining skills of provider personnel. Organisations needed 'to be smarter, cleverer and more flexible' (Western Australian participant), with greater investment for 'not just trainers and industry practitioners, not just PD, not just skills and knowledge, but professional lifelong learner-educators' (Victorian participant). Making providers into employers of choice is also an important goal.

Participants cited many examples of current good practice that position their organisations favourably for the future. Not surprisingly, many of the activities identified as being 'good practice' were similar to those outlined by other participants as requiring attention if the capability of their organisations were to be enhanced. Key practices to be adopted here include a focus on workplace learning and workforce development, an emphasis on client needs through flexibility in delivery and customisation, targeted strategic planning, the effective use of relationships and partnerships, a focus on quality, quality improvement and accountability, and a commitment to innovation and excellence.

The consortium's outputs

In addition to the reports on each of the seven major research activities and these overview papers, the consortium has produced a range of other information and resources to assist providers. When fully completed, these will include a series of literature reviews, facts sheets, discussion papers, tools and models to assist providers to build their capability.

An overview of the consortium's research findings is available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1827.html>. Information about the consortium's program can be found at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/workinprogress/projects/10345.html>. Subscribe to NCVER News at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/newsevents/subscribe.html> to stay informed about when new products will be released.