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Examining learning partnerships in northern Australia

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Australian Government
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

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Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Examining learning partnerships in northern Australia: Support document—VET/ACE connections literature review* and *Examining learning partnerships in northern Australia: Support document—VET/ACE connections statistical profile*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1972.html>.

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About the research

Examining learning partnerships in northern Australia by John Guenther, Ian Falk, Allan Arnott, Dorothy Lucardie and Helen Spiers*

Partnerships between formal and informal training providers are often concerned with addressing skills shortages and local labour market needs. For this reason, the focus of partnerships is usually on skills acquisition and employment. However, forming partnerships can also result in other socioeconomic benefits that may be incidental, but are also valuable. These merit greater attention.

This report investigates the characteristics of partnerships between formal and informal training providers and how they can be focused to improve the socioeconomic wellbeing of communities and individuals. Interviews with key stakeholder groups at three northern Australian regional sites were used to gain an insight into the characteristics of successful partnerships. While education and employment outcomes still rated heavily, other identified outcomes were related to health, access to and use of resources, social activities, and family and community life.

The three locations investigated are diverse in terms of their economic bases and demographic characteristics; however, the authors found successful partnerships had common traits. These commonalities suggest that the findings of this report will be valid beyond the northern Australian case studies.

This report will be relevant to practitioners and policy-makers wanting to better understand the intersections between informal learning and training and the contribution that learning partnerships can make to strengthening communities.

Key messages

- Providers of formal and informal training do not 'naturally' come together to form partnerships. Rather, industry, community and government stakeholders instigate these partnerships for specific purposes.
- Employment-related outcomes are usually the primary goal of partnerships; however, they can also deliver other socioeconomic benefits. These include education and learning, health, social, leisure and financial outcomes. These additional benefits deserve the attention of funding bodies.
- Productive partnerships between training providers are realised when: the training supports the goals of industry, communities and government stakeholders; there is trust between partners; and there is a combination of formal, non-formal and informal learning offered.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

* This project was managed by Charles Darwin University.

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Introduction

Partnerships between providers of formal and informal training can help to achieve positive outcomes for industry, communities and individuals. This report examines the impact of partnerships between training providers in regional areas of northern Australia. It also outlines the social, economic and education benefits that can result from well-defined collaborative partnerships.

The primary aim of this research was to develop an understanding of the context, extent and nature of partnerships between training providers; to identify what makes them effective in achieving positive socioeconomic outcomes; and to identify what individuals, communities and industry stakeholders can do to increase the likelihood of partnerships achieving positive outcomes.

In order to gain a better understanding of training partnerships, the researchers examined 16 training partnerships in northern Australia. The areas studied were: the Bowen Basin area in central Queensland; the Central Australian region in the Northern Territory; and the Kakadu region in west Arnhem Land. The researchers carried out semi-structured interviews with key stakeholder groups involved in partnerships. These include local employers, Indigenous associations, and government and private agencies. A minimum of 12 interviews were conducted at each site. Other data, including publicly available statistical data, research literature, and locally relevant documents, were used to provide contextual information. The socioeconomic outcomes of partnerships were assessed using a social indicators framework from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED).

Findings

Partnerships between training providers are primarily formed to meet the skill and employment needs of industry, community groups and government stakeholders. These groups usually take the lead in establishing effective partnerships.

All of the sites examined in this research are currently experiencing skills shortages. As a consequence, the majority of the partnerships studied focused on achieving employment outcomes. The employment outcomes reported in the interviews included: an increase in the number of local employment opportunities, particularly for women returning to work and young people who have been disengaged from work or study; an increase in employability skills; and the integration of local Indigenous young people into the workforce.

While local employment needs generally provide the basis of training partnerships, there are other socioeconomic benefits that result from partnerships, including improvements in health; use of community resources and access to external financial resources; English language, literacy and numeracy; acquisition of vocational education and training (VET) qualifications and life skills; and social connectedness and improved activities for youth.

Effective partnerships between training providers had five key elements. These are: leadership (brokering); leadership (local 'shakers and movers'); relationships and trust; local resource-sharing; and access to external resources.

Leadership 'brokers' are usually from industry or community groups and have a broad vision and plan for the needs of the area. These leaders bring together industry, community and provider groups to respond to the needs of the region. Leadership 'movers and shakers' are usually those who foster local networks and organise access to local resources. This leadership role could be undertaken by training providers or community groups.

Partnerships that have sound relationships and build trust between partnership members and local stakeholders, such as community groups, tend to be effective in achieving their goals and in promoting greater sharing of local resources between these groups. Nevertheless, successful ongoing partnerships rely on access to external funding. The leadership 'broker' usually arranges access to these external resources.

To achieve an effective partnership, it is important for those involved to communicate well, establish sound protocols and have regular contact. Good publicity also helps, as does recognising the mutual benefits of the partnerships and the needs of other partners and the broader community.

Partnerships are also likely to achieve positive socioeconomic outcomes when they provide training that is supportive of community needs, supports the goals and aims of stakeholders, builds relationships and trust, and provides a mix of both formal and informal learning.

Implications

Although training providers often play a secondary role in directing the purpose of partnerships, they play an instrumental role in finding ways to meet the training needs of industry and communities. Training providers could be proactive in anticipating the kinds of skills that may be required in partnerships—such as leadership—and planning for, and developing, these skills.

Non-formal training is an important factor in achieving positive learning outcomes. This research shows that using a mix of formal and informal training methods can be a very effective strategy for achieving social outcomes and enhancing formal learning.

Most of the funding for partnerships in this study focuses on industry's employment needs; however, this research suggests that partnerships would benefit from funding models which support the needs of communities more broadly. Partnerships that have access to a mix of funding from both local and government sources also have a greater ability to deliver training that meets local needs.

Introduction

Collaborative partnerships between vocational education and training (VET) and adult and community education (ACE) stakeholders are formed to meet a variety of needs. In such partnerships the collaborative work is mutually beneficial and depends on a well-defined relationship between two or more organisations—including education and training providers—to achieve common goals. In this research, the definition offered by Mattessich, Murray-Close and Monsey (2004, p.4) is adopted:

> Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organisations to achieve common goals.

As there is no recognised ACE provision in the areas studied, this report considers ACE as the informal adult learning that takes place outside the formal VET sector. VET refers to formal training that is funded under specific criteria determined by the Australian Government.

The mutual benefits of partnerships arrangements between VET and ACE stakeholders may seem obvious: both groups of providers are presumably interested in meeting community learning needs; both may have access to a number of complementary resources that could be shared and applied more effectively to the learning contexts in which they work; and both have an array of networks into the community, with government and within industry that may be useful in furthering their shared aims. This may suggest that VET and ACE providers are a natural 'fit' for promoting and developing a range of outcomes. But is this the case? And under what circumstances do VET and ACE providers work together most effectively and for what purposes? And can we really talk about ACE and VET as sectors? These questions form an important background to the research undertaken for this report.

Research purpose

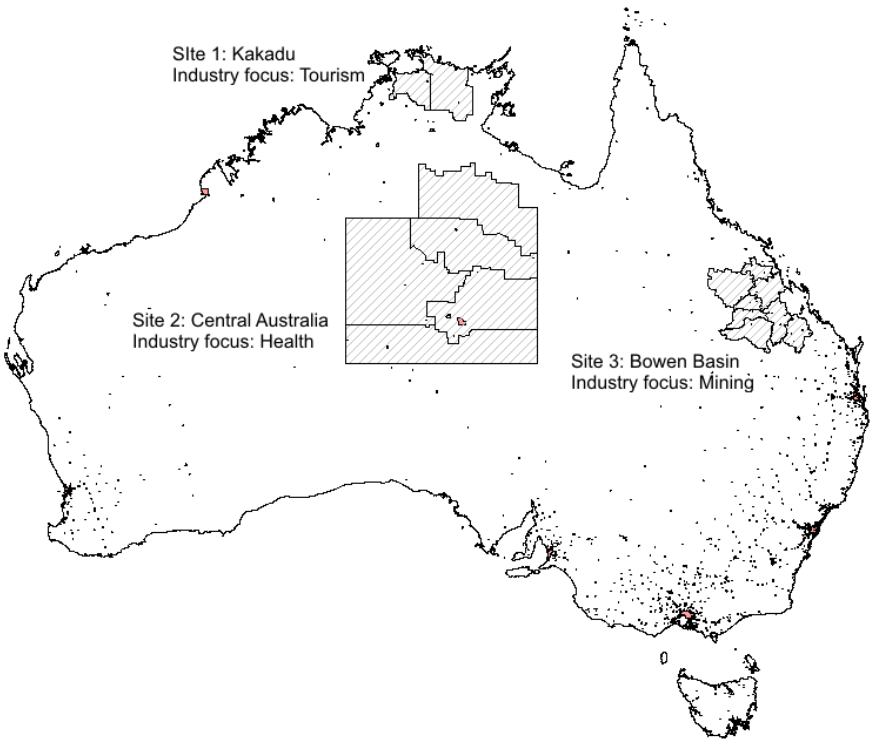
There are three main purposes of this research. Firstly, it aims to uncover the mechanisms that already exist for effective VET and ACE collaborations to achieve a broad range of socioeconomic outcomes for individuals, communities and industries. The research was conducted in the Northern Territory and in Queensland. In particular, given the regional context, there is a focus on what constitutes effective outcomes with three industry/community intersections in mind: health in Central Australian (with a focus on the Northern Territory) communities; tourism in Kakadu/west Arnhem Land (Northern Territory) communities; and mining in the Bowen Basin (central Queensland) communities. In doing so, the research determines how various stakeholders in different community contexts perceive the socioeconomic benefits of VET and ACE, how they collaborate and to what extent funding arrangements and existing policies in the three jurisdictions either facilitate or hinder collaborations. Figure 1 shows the regions covered by these contexts.

Secondly, the research aims to examine the extent and nature of the VET–ACE connections in terms of provider types and relationships and the rationale for collaboration. Within the areas of interest described above, the project will identify the range of VET–ACE partnerships and connections that exist in the sites. In this project, 'partnerships and connections' may be formal or informal

connections within and between organisations. The project explores the nature of partnerships and connections with government and/or industry and/or community and the extent to which each player in the relationship drives the agenda and outcomes of the collaborative process.

Thirdly, the project identifies processes and practical steps that stakeholders can apply to maximise the effectiveness of the socioeconomic outcomes defined above. The research identifies practical principles and solutions and the consequent policy implications of these, which could then be applied in other regional contexts across Australia.

Figure 1 Case study sites: VET–ACE connections showing site industry focus



Source: 2001 Australian Standard Geographic Classification boundaries (ABS 2003a)

Research questions

The research addresses three main research questions and related sub-questions.

Stage 1: What is the context, extent and nature of VET–ACE collaboration?

- ✧ How does regional contextual data shed light on the VET and/or ACE fields of practice?
- ✧ How do jurisdictional policies enable or restrict VET–ACE collaborative outcomes?
- ✧ What are the perceived benefits of VET–ACE connections?
- ✧ How do existing structures contribute to collaboration and outcomes?

Stage 2: How do VET and/or ACE providers collaborate for effective socioeconomic outcomes?

- ✧ What are the features that facilitate/hinder successful outcomes?
- ✧ What drives the formation and development of effective partnerships and connections?

Stage 3: What can existing/emerging VET and/or ACE providers do to increase the probability of effective socioeconomic outcomes?

- ✧ What aspects of the partnership contribute?
- ✧ What aspects of government policy/funding/administration contribute?
- ✧ What aspects of the provision context contribute?

Literature review

Traditional views of ACE and VET are such that the former is seen to be non-formal training for personal and community benefit and the latter is considered to be more formal, accredited training with a vocational/employment outcome in mind. However, there is often an overlap between the two sectors, and indeed collaborative partnerships often form around the two sectors for specific purposes. Moreover, the split between formal and non-formal learning often represented by these sectors will be viewed in this project as needing a 'third leg' to make sense of the VET–ACE partnerships described here, namely informal learning. It will be seen that these three forms of learning: formal, non-formal and informal work together in three sites, which may be conceived as 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1998); that is, 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who learn to do it better as a result of their ongoing interactions' (Wenger 2005).

The literature review therefore deals first with definitional issues surrounding VET and ACE and their relationship to these types of learning. It then goes on to describe what we mean by collaboration before considering why VET–ACE collaborative partnerships form. Finally we lay down a foundation for what we mean by 'success' or 'effectiveness' in this report.

Defining VET and ACE

The Department of Education, Science and Training (2005) defines vocational education and training as:

> … post-compulsory education and training, excluding degree and higher level programs delivered by higher education institutions, which provides people with occupational or work-related knowledge and skills. VET also includes programs which provide the basis for subsequent vocational programs.

The mission statement of the national VET system is 'to ensure that the skills of the Australian labour force are sufficient to support internationally competitive commerce and industry and to provide individuals with opportunities to optimise their potential' (ANTA 1998). The research questions for this study are aimed equally at addressing the two components of this statement: supporting industry on the one hand and, on the other, providing individuals with opportunities to optimise their potential by demonstrating the socioeconomic outcomes likely to accrue to them.

Knight and Nestor (2000) define ACE as 'intended principally for adults, including general, vocational, basic and community education, and recreation, leisure and personal enrichment programs'. It is thus a response to the lifelong learning needs of the community (Department of Education and Training [ACT] 2005)—a fourth sector of education, with schools, higher education and VET being the other three. The defining characteristics of ACE include: easy access and flexible participation; consumer-driven and learner-centred classes and courses; a wide variety of learning in areas ranging from self-improvement, general education, leisure, personal and community development, employment skills and preparation for vocational education and training; and a second-chance role (Golding, Davies & Volkoff 2001; Department of Education and Training [ACT] 2005).

Many ACE providers offer vocational education and training both as non-formal and as accredited courses, with some ACE providers being registered training organisations (Hawke, Kimberley & Melville 2002). According to the National Centre for Vocational Education research (NCVER 2003), approximately three-quarters of the nearly 21 000 hours delivered as ACE in 2001 were vocational in nature. ACE is therefore a significant part of the Australian training system (Australian Government 2005; NCVER 2001).

VET as formal learning, ACE as non-formal learning

Another way of looking at the differences between ACE and VET is to consider the ways in which learning occurs. The former is sometimes seen to be non-formal, essentially non-institutional and for personal and community benefit, while the latter is considered to be more formal, institutional, accredited training with a vocational/employment outcome in mind. The distinctions between 'non-formal', 'informal' and 'formal' are important to assist in understanding the apparent differences between distinct VET and ACE sectors. Some prefer not to distinguish between informal and non-formal. For example, Colley, Hodgkinson and Malcolm (2003, p.viii) conclude that: 'There is no clear difference between informal and non-formal learning. The terms are used interchangeably…' However, others argue differently, suggesting that 'non-formal' learning is structured, intentional, and officially recognised, *but not accredited* as formal learning is, while 'informal' learning is incidental, unstructured and officially not recognised (for example, European Commission 2001; OECD 2003). To add to the confusion, Marsick and Watkins (2001) differentiate 'informal' from 'incidental' learning the same way that the European Commission distinguishes between non-formal and informal learning. Livingstone (2005) distinguishes between informal and 'non-taught' learning in much the same way.

While acknowledging this diverse array of definitions, it is clear there are differences between these three kinds of learning; this research project adopts the European Commission–OECD (OECD 2003, p.25) definitions.

- 'Formal learning is defined as taking place in an organised, structured setting … this kind of learning … leads to certification'.
- Non-formal learning refers to organised activities that are not explicitly identified as learning activities but have a major learning component … 'it does not lead to qualifications or certification'.
- 'Informal learning occurs by chance or during everyday activities'. Another term used is 'experiential learning'.

In terms of the defined sectors then, ACE tends to align more closely with non-formal learning and VET with formal learning. Boundaries between the two sectors, however, are becoming blurred or contested (Chapman, Watson & Wheelahan 2001). Birch et al. (2003), commenting on the ACE sector, state that: 'An increasing trend is the provision of distinctly vocational and accredited training, so-called VET ACE, which now accounts for half of reported ACE' (p.44).

Brown's (2001) suggestion that there is an overlap rather than a divide among the various foci of learning is applicable to ACE and VET: ACE is acquiring an increasingly vocational face, while the notion of VET as a distinct sector is blurring. An example of this is the phrase 'ACE VET', used to describe 'vocational learning (accredited or non-accredited) provided by an organisation set up to deliver adult and community education …' (Saunders 2001, p.18). VET's influence appears to be spreading through an increased diversity of providers, and through its colonisation of other training areas such as ACE, VET in Schools and adult literacy and numeracy (Hawke, Kimberley & Melville 2002; Henry & Grundy 2004). A more integrated approach to planning is becoming seen as a necessary strategy for developing skills for the future (for example, Government of South Australia 2003).

It is also important to point out that discussions concerning 'situated' or 'workplace learning' also refer to the informal learning that occurs as people perform their work. Billett (1996) defines workplace learning environments as 'arenas of activity in which socio-culturally determined practice occurs, with that practice being shaped by the requirements of the particular workplace situation. Similarly, both Lave and Wenger (1991) and Harris et al. (1998) indicate that this involvement in communities of practice is largely unplanned and unstructured. It is arguable that the notion of the workplace (that is, engaging in a purposeful activity to create a product) could, in this instance, be associated with the initiation, development and operation of a program of learning, such as we see in each of the case study sites. As noted below and in the case studies, the variety of learning activities that occur in the case study sites encompasses informal and non-formal learning and the formal program. The learning activities required to generate, provide the infrastructure for and deliver a formal course incorporate a range of learning processes and activities, which are to some degree subservient to the main game—the VET course. What is important here is that the three kinds of learning provide a framework to explain the array of learning activities that contribute to individual, industry, community/region and socioeconomic outcomes. The three types of learning also explain the diverse structures and purposes of partnerships that form in the absence of a formal 'ACE sector'.

How is 'collaboration' defined?

Collaboration is the act of working jointly—a joint effort of multiple individuals or work groups to accomplish a task or project (Guenther & Millar 2007). The term is often associated with 'alliances' and 'coalitions' (Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Huxham & Vangen 2000). In human services it is the collaborative effort of two or more agencies or service providers in order to better serve their participants and achieve results which are unrealisable working alone. A useful definition adopted in this report draws together the ideas of mutual benefit, relationship and shared goals:

> Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organisations to achieve common goals. (Mattessich, Murray-Close & Monsey 2004, p.4)

While collaboration is often used to mean the same thing as coordination, partnerships and networks, it is useful here to draw some distinctions. Organisations may work together in a continuum of effort, with informal processes of cooperation and coordination at one end and more formal processes of collaboration at the other (Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth 2004). A 'collaborative partnership' then involves linkages of a stronger kind, built around a shared mission to pursue longer-term goals, and as such requires a higher degree of effort, commitment and alignment than some other forms of interaction.

> Collaboration is an aspiration, not a starting-point. It requires organisational learning, and inter-organisational learning. (Head 2004)

Collaborative partnerships are defined by both processes and structures (D'Amour et al. 2005). This distinction adds some fluidity to the definition and reflects the sometimes vaguely defined descriptions of collaborations. As a response to complex social challenges in which learning often plays a role, collaboration is believed to result in outcomes that are more integrated and holistic, and therefore more sustainable (Beyerlein, Johnson & Beyerlein 2004; Carpenter, Griffin & Brown 2005; Keast et al. 2004). In much of the literature reviewed, the terms 'partnership' and 'collaboration' are used more or less interchangeably (for example, Gelade, Stehlik & Willis 2006; Huxham & Vangen 2000; Takahashi & Smutny 2002). Some research appears to suggest that collaboration is a characteristic of partnerships (Allison, Gorringe & Lacey 2006). In this report we use the term 'partnership' to mean 'collaborative partnership' and adopt the Mattessich, Murray-Close and Monsey (2004) definition quoted above.

VET–ACE collaborative partnerships: Why do they form?

Cross-sectoral collaborative partnerships between educational institutions, employers, community bodies and local education authorities are sometimes formed in order to address local labour market needs. The OECD argues that this is in fact the predominant motivation for the formation of skill development partnerships and furthermore that more often than not it is 'regional skills agencies' that 'provide the lead' (OECD 2006, pp.63–4). Within this model training providers play a strategic role, but not necessarily a leading role. In the United Kingdom, for example, the British lifelong learning partnerships and the learning and skills councils coordinate training across adult, community education and post-school sectors (Kearns & Papadopoulos 2000). Some ACE providers operate in partnership with schools, co-delivering programs with schools to ensure that students stay engaged in the learning process (Dunn & Joseph 2004). Collaborations in northern Australia designed to identify and take action to meet skills deficits in industry are similar to these.

VET partnerships are developing across Australia to address the needs of communities and interest groups within these (Kearns, Murphy & Villiers 1996; Kilpatrick, Fulton & Bell 2001; Kilpatrick et al. 2001). Recent research into more than a hundred partnerships indicated that rural VET partnerships are particularly useful for meeting the needs of regional communities as opposed to meeting the needs of industry (Kilpatrick & Guenther 2003). The outcomes framework offered by Clemans, Hartley and Macrae (2003) provides a useful point of reference when considering the potential outcomes of learning. While the Clemans framework is primarily concerned with ACE outcomes, it places learning outcomes in a matrix of personal, community and economic purposes matched with skill, knowledge and social and identity purposes. Specifically, the outcomes they noted include 'developing and strengthening networks', 'building community resources' and 'involvement in community development projects' (pp.23–5). Resource-sharing is seen as a key outcome for learning partnerships in rural Australia (Clayton et al. 2004). Underpinning this sharing is trust that emerges out of relationships built over time (Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia 2001; Kilpatrick 2003; Sommerlad, Duke & McDonald 1998).

However, the cross-sectoral linkages that exist between ACE and VET remain sporadic (Wheelahan 2000) and ad hoc. Partnerships and collaborative arrangements between schools, VET and ACE providers are advocated in order to address the general and vocational needs of school students enrolled in applied learning and vocational education courses (Henry & Grundy 2004). Similarly, partnerships between VET and ACE providers could address the needs of increasing numbers of adult students obtaining qualifications or parts of qualifications from a range of different sectors (Dunn & Joseph 2004). Kearns (2004) notes increasingly active collaboration between education sectors in Australia, 'with adult and community education, schools, VET, and universities collaborating and contributing … [and] learning brokers active in building partnership and collaboration' (p.17).

In Victoria, responding to the need to improve linkages between qualifications, the Victorian Qualifications Authority is investigating the possibility of developing a credit-based framework for post-compulsory qualifications across the state. Similar frameworks are in operation or being developed overseas, for example, in New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, England, the European Union and South Africa (Dunn & Joseph 2004). Henry and Grundy (2004, p.25) write:

> There is a sense in which the VET sector of the education and training systems of Australia is driving the agenda for cross-sectoral reform. A perusal of the research projects funded by ANTA and NCVER over the past five years indicates a drive in the direction of building the arguments for cross-sectoral developments and identifying the organisational arrangements that will facilitate collaborative institutional and programmatic relationships.

Cross-sectoral linkages are a consistent theme in recent national and state education policy documents across Australia. The publication *New framework for vocational education in schools—Policy directions* (2000) from the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs notes the need for establishing linkages between institutions delivering related vocational learning services.

Success and effectiveness

The literature on collaborative partnerships shows that many authors use the terms 'success' and 'effectiveness' either synonymously or complementarily, with assumed, unarticulated definitions (for example, Allison, Gorringe & Lacey 2006; Barnes 2000; Genefke & McDonald 2001). How do we determine what constitutes an effective partnership? Is effectiveness dependent on the outcomes of partnership processes (for example, the extent to which strong relationships are formed) or is effectiveness determined by the outcomes of the partnership's programs (for example, the extent to which clients' needs are satisfied)? It may be reasonable to assume that effectiveness and success are determined by the product of 'partnership work' as much as they are by the achievement of objectives for client groups (Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005).)

The effectiveness or success of learning partnerships has been shown in research to be determined by a number of factors. Leadership within the partnership is a key driver (Kilpatrick et al. 2002). Some refer to an 'enabling' style of leadership in this context (for example, Falk & Mulford 2001; Kilpatrick et al. 2001)—meaning a collective and differentiated approach rather than a single and traditional top-down approach. This style of leadership is consistent with a view of the role of training as 'brokers' who facilitate learning within the context of a partnership.

There is no 'one size fits all' process for developing effective collaborative partnerships. The process is situational (Falk & Smith 2003). Evidence for whether collaboration is being successfully promoted can be related, not only to underpinning generic factors and underpinning site-specific factors, but also to indicators of success related to process and structures (Kilpatrick et al. 2002), around which an evaluative framework may be developed (Falk forthcoming). For collaborative success, there are key areas that require ongoing attention. These can be grouped according to six categories: factors associated with the working environment; membership characteristics; process and structure; communication; purpose; and resources (Mattessich, Murray-Close & Monsey 2004).

In terms of the measures of success of partnerships, Kilpatrick and Guenther (2003) found that generally partners themselves decide what outcomes were considered to be effective. They observed that partnerships did not consult with the objects of their activity (clients or equity groups) in order to determine the effectiveness of outcomes. Rather the purpose of the partnership was a key determinant of the measurement of success. Guenther (2005, p.307), in research about VET and capacity-building in northern Australia, found three main functions of partnerships. First, partnerships acted to facilitate access to resources. Second, partnerships provided leadership and direction. One of the key functions described was that of providing coordination, liaison or brokerage between providers, employers and participants. Third, partnerships were effective in building strategic relationships with program stakeholders. Embedded within the process was the formation of trust within the relationship. Seddon and Billett (2004, p.25) describe many of the same functions as being associated with the 'effective consolidation of the partnership'.

Research approach and focus

The study employed a mixed-methods or mixed-models approach (Creswell 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998), drawing on: publicly available statistical data to provide informing contextual background; in-depth data collected on-site in the form of semi-structured interviews; and data collected on-site in the form of additional literature and locally relevant documents. The findings presented here are drawn both from the results of the semi-structured interviews conducted on-site and from the relevant quantitative and literature review data collected throughout the project. The quantitative–qualitative sequence follows Creswell's (2003, p.215) 'sequential explanatory strategy', characterised by 'the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data'. The study fits a model described by Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998, p.44) as 'quantitative methods to enlarge on qualitative study'. The methodology is designed for theory building—as opposed to hypothesis testing—and uses inductive strategies to draw conclusions from the data (Johnson & Christensen 2004).

The basis for an assessment of socioeconomic outcomes is a list of OECD (1982) social indicators, which form a useful framework for this kind of evaluation. The list includes indicators under headings of health, education and learning, command over goods and services, employment and quality of working life, time and leisure, physical environment (access and ecology), social environment, and personal safety. The same list, slightly modified, has been used more recently by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2001) in a framework for measuring wellbeing.

A minimum of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted at each site (Bowen Basin, Central Australia and Kakadu) with key stakeholder groups. Sample selection therefore follows a 'purposeful' or 'purposive' sampling strategy (Bernard 2000, p.176; Patton 2002, p.230). Table 1 shows the organisations represented in the case study interviews. The partnerships identified for the purposes of this research were what were earlier described as 'collaborative partnerships'. For ethical reasons we cannot disclose the names of the organisations involved in the blending of the various stakeholder groups across the collaborative partnerships. The organisation types listed represent one major partnership in Central Australia, seven in Kakadu and eight in the Bowen Basin. The partnerships in the Kakadu and Bowen Basin sites involve from two to six key representative organisations and are based either in a community or a region.

Table 1 Stakeholders in VET–ACE collaborative partnerships interviewed for this project

Central Australia/health	Kakadu/West Arnhem/tourism	Bowen Basin/mining
Northern Territory Government agency representatives	Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training representative	State government agencies
Australian Government funding bodies	Tourism peak body representatives	Mining industry representatives
Aboriginal health workers	Indigenous land users	TAFE providers
Remote area health nurses and other health professionals	Tourism industry representatives	Community development officers
Aboriginal community controlled health organisations	Indigenous business representatives	Youth training committee representatives
Central Australian Remote Health Development Services	National park management and board of management	Learning Network Queensland
	Public VET providers	Literacy and numeracy providers
	Regional/community development coordinators	School representatives
		Regional development organisations

Context

Kakadu

Kakadu is a cultural landscape, believed to be shaped by the spiritual ancestors of Aboriginal people during the Creation Time. The Kakadu Region, which includes the Kakadu National Park, Jabiru and parts of Arnhem Land, is located on the edge of western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, around three hours travelling time east of Darwin, its main service centre. Kakadu National Park is managed jointly by its Aboriginal traditional owners and the federal Department of the Environment and Heritage. The name 'Kakadu' comes from an Aboriginal floodplain language called Gagudju, which was one of the languages spoken in the north of the park at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The town of Jabiru is situated in the northern part of Kakadu. The Mirrar people are the traditional owners of the Jabiru area. With a population of about 1100 people, plus about 400 people in the rest of Kakadu, Jabiru was initially established to service the Ranger Uranium Mine, but now hosts a range of services for residents and tourists. Approximately 20% of Jabiru's population is Indigenous, while the Kakadu Park population is about 50% Indigenous.

Within an hour's drive from Jabiru across East Alligator River is the Indigenous community of Kunbarllanjnja (Oenpelli), located on a small ridge between coastal black soil plains, marshes and the Arnhem Land Escarpment. There are strong Indigenous cultural links between these two towns and the western Arnhem Land homeland centres. Approximately three-quarters of the population east of the East Alligator River describe themselves as Australian Indigenous language speakers. In this context, much of the training that would otherwise be provided by 'ACE' providers is undertaken by industry in order to supplement formal training delivered as part of a certificate qualification.

Central Australia context

The area of Central Australia extends north to the Nicholson River and out to the borders of Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia. Across this area many Aboriginal communities (from 30 to 1000 people in each) live on their traditional lands and attempt to build independence through community control of services in their communities. For most Aboriginal people English is a third or fourth language and English literacy and numeracy is a key barrier to meeting the requirements of VET competencies. Employment opportunities in remote Central Australia are limited and existing positions require qualifications that the local Aboriginal people do not have. Education and health are key issues for the Aboriginal people living in Central Australia.

A further issue, which has been evident for some time, but which has only recently received significant media attention, relates to community safety and family violence (for example, Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2006; Rogers 2005). The impact of this issue on the functionality of many Central (and many other remote Indigenous) Australian communities and the consequent health and wellbeing of individuals in those places is enormous. At the same time, recent ABS data point to a notable decline in employment participation among the Indigenous labour force of remote Australia (ABS 2006). The labour force participation rate among Indigenous persons aged 15 and over in remote areas of Australia has fallen steadily from 62.9% in 2002 to 49.2% in 2005. In the major cities, participation among the same demographic group has increased, masking to some extent the issue of employment in remote areas. In the Northern Territory, the participation rate has fallen from 56.2% in 2002 to 40.7% in 2005. The uncertainties associated with the long-established Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme add to the pressures faced by the Central Australian region.

Within the primary health care context 12 Aboriginal community controlled health organisations (ACCHOs) operate in remote areas and in the townships of Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. The remaining 26 primary health care services are run by the Northern Territory Department of Health

and Community Services, with the rollout of the Primary Health Care Access Plan expected to move these services to Aboriginal community control. In this context VET or ACE delivery to the primary health care industry is undertaken by the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services (CARHDS) through customised and flexible delivery in the workplace of either accredited or non-accredited training, according to the needs of the individuals and their workplace.

Bowen Basin

The Bowen Basin is located in central Queensland in an area extending from the south of the town of Emerald to the north of Moronbah. The main service centres for the region are Mackay and Rockhampton. Economically, the region is driven primarily by coal mining, but it is historically an agricultural area, predominantly cattle and to a lesser extent horticulture, sheep and dairy (Central Queensland A New Millennium 2002). Formal training in the region is largely driven by the needs of the coal mining industry and allied industries (notably energy), which are reportedly experiencing skills shortages (Central Queensland Regional Planning Advisory Committee 2002). The non-formal or community-based or adult learning sector is driven also to some extent by the needs of industry, which funds community-based learning initiatives, partly in order to make mining communities more liveable (for example, BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance 2004; Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining 2005).

Findings

In this chapter, we discuss the data as they relate to each research question, then synthesise each research question by explicitly summarising the findings across all the case study sites according to the research questions and sub-questions. A summary of the key findings is included at the end of the chapter.

Research question 1: What is the context, extent and nature of VET–ACE collaboration?

In answering this first question we begin with context and present an abridged version of the statistical profile of each of the research sites (described more fully in the support document). The section then draws on examples from each case study site to illustrate and broadly inform this question. Finally in this section an analysis of the findings from all sites is presented vis-a-vis the four sub-questions of the broader question.

Statistical overview

Table 2 represents a summary of key contextual statistics for the three case study sites. A more thorough analysis of statistical data is given in the support document. A few important observations and inferences can be made from these data. Of note are the ten-year population changes for the three sites. The decline in the Bowen Basin population is typical of many regional areas in Australia and reflects the vulnerability of the region, particularly in a period of economic downturn. A decreasing population results in a decreasing skills base. In periods of growth, such as is being experienced currently in the Bowen Basin, restoring that skills base becomes a priority for industries (in this case, mining and agriculture). The population growth of the two Northern Territory sites is typical of many remote mainly Indigenous areas in Australia, which also reflect relatively high birth rates and a low median age.

The significance of 'government administration and defence' as the major industry of employment for Central Australia and Kakadu is partly the result of the Community Development and Employment Projects scheme as a source of employment for many Indigenous people in those areas. In Kakadu it is also the result of employment in the national park. Defence also plays a role as a source of employment for both these areas. One of the opportunities for addressing skills shortages across all three sites involves the integration of Indigenous people into the labour force. The high proportion of Indigenous adults not working represents a largely untapped—and increasing—pool of labour (see also table 3).

However, as shown in the table 2, this labour pool is relatively unskilled, with a relatively low proportion of the population holding certificate qualifications. Both vocational training and non-vocational training are important in addressing this skills need. Indigenous people have been significant users of vocational training at lower qualification levels (AQF I and II), although recent NCVER data suggest that in remote areas there is a notable declining participation trend. Similarly, Young, Guenther and Boyle (2007) report that in the desert region of Australia Indigenous

participation in VET has declined by 25% in the 2003–04 period. NCVER (2005) reports that in the remote areas of Australia Indigenous participation in VET declined by 14% in the same period. In some jurisdictions the decline has been more marked (for example, 33% in South Australia, 20% in New South Wales).

Table 2 Selected contextual statistics for the Bowen Basin, Central Australia and Kakadu regions

Data (total Australian figures in parentheses)	Bowen Basin		Central Australia		Kakadu	
Population 2001[1]		60 507		49 404		8 459
Population change 1991–2001[2] (12.6%)		-5.3%		13.9%		20.5%
Indigenous population 2001[1] (2.2%)		4.1%		32.9%		50.7%
Indigenous language speakers[1] (0.3%)		0.1%		22.4%		44.0%
Main industries of employment 2001[1] (Percentage employed)	Mining	21.3%	Government administration and defence	12.2%	Government administration and defence	30.2%
	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	17.0%	Retail trade	11.9%	Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	9.8%
Percentage of Indigenous labour force in CDEP 2001[3] (14.2%)		16.9%		43.2%		74.2%
Percentage of Indigenous labour force not working 2001[3] (44.1%)		52.8%		71.9%		65.9%
Main fields of study 2004[4] (percentage of total)	Engineering and related technologies	43.3%	Subject-only enrolment	19.4%	Food, hospitality and personal services	17.0%
	Management and commerce	16.9%	Management and commerce	12.3%	Engineering and related technologies	15.3%
Percentage of 15+ year-olds with certificate qualifications 2001[1] (15.8%)		18.6%		14.1%		11.1%
Standardised death rate 2001 (6.3) [5, 6]		7.2		14.4		19.7

Note: CDEP = Community Development Employment Projects
Sources: (1) ABS 2002a; (2) ABS 2003b; (3) ABS 2002b; (4) NCVER 2005 special request; (5) ABS 2005; (6) ABS 2003a

Table 3, which is based on recent ABS labour force data, highlights the declining employment participation rates among Indigenous people in the Northern Territory and in all remote areas of Australia. The most notable decline in the table is for the Northern Territory, where labour force participation among Indigenous people has declined by more than 15 percentage points over a three-year period.

Table 3 Labour force participation rate among Indigenous people aged 15 years and over by region, %

Year	Queensland	Northern Territory	Remote areas of Australia
2002	63.2	56.2	62.9
2003	61.7	50.9	55.9
2004	61.3	46.2	50.6
2005	62.7	40.7	49.2

Source: ABS (2006)

Interview and case study data

Kakadu

Of seven identified and reviewed collaborative partnerships, all could be described as having a focus on regional sustainability, in terms of employment opportunities with, in almost all of the examples, local Indigenous people in mind. Many of these partnerships are initiated to compensate for shortfalls in the secondary schooling outcomes for the Indigenous people in the region. In many of the instances of strong sustainable partnerships, they are involved both in the initial partnership development and in the resultant training delivered by VET or ACE providers. The latter concept is not acknowledged in such terms, and tends in this region to be registered training organisations which happen also to be private companies (mining, tourism/hospitality), who fund those parts of the training that cannot be accomplished with VET or other accredited training.

Program partners described a number of initiatives in remote parts of the region, from Maningrida in Arnhem Land to Mary River in the southern end of Kakadu National Park, that were aimed primarily at addressing local skills shortages in the main industry areas of tourism and hospitality, mining and conservation. It was anticipated by those involved that such a focus would reduce the seasonal fluctuations in population each year (as the busy tourist-oriented dry season begins and ends) and ensure longer-term employment opportunities for the youth of the region. Each of the partnerships included several employers from the region and a mix of both large and small businesses, at least one Indigenous association, as well as several government and private funding agencies. Each played a variety of roles related to VET and ACE provision. The lead agencies were not confined to one type of organisation and ranged across a variety of industry sectors, from large companies in the tourism or mining industry, to smaller non-government/government-funded organisations. They were not usually from the VET sector but from private industry or Indigenous associations.

The education stakeholders ranged from the local school, a regionally based university and VET providers, including private and publicly funded registered training organisations. It was apparent that the VET providers were all providing, to various degrees, a mix of VET and ACE training, as no official ACE network exists in the region or the Northern Territory. In the majority of instances, however, the ACE provision was funded by large companies or Indigenous associations and aimed to secure a level of English literacy and personal management skills to ensure that the participants could succeed in the VET training. This is due to the vocational training focus being predominantly on accredited courses.

Central Australia

This case study focuses on one collaborative partnership that was established and driven by Aboriginal communities. It brought together the primary health care services, and the provision of both ACE and VET reflected the 'overlap rather than divide' discussed by Brown (2001). The partnership currently exists in 36 different locations across Central Australia. It extends to two government departments, the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services and the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (federal Department of Health and Ageing). Education and training is delivered in direct consultation with all partners and in a manner that meets the needs of the Aboriginal communities. The direct relationship between the Aboriginal communities and the training provider, the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services, is through governance by the Aboriginal community controlled health organisations. As the employers of the learners, the government departments and the Aboriginal community controlled health organisations reported a good working relationship; they also felt that they received appropriate and timely feedback and that the training had met their expectations. Employers had differing views about who drives the agenda between the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services and themselves. Some identified the boards of directors (voted in by the membership) of the Aboriginal community controlled health organisations as driving the agenda, some described the employers as the driving force, while others felt that it was a mutual process. This collaboration reflects a focus on building community capacity to govern their own education

and training by 'engaging in action and collaborative participation' (New South Wales Government 2003). The distinction between ACE and VET in this partnership context is difficult to differentiate because of the nature of the training required.

Training that could be described as 'ACE' is delivered both by the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services (non-formally) and by the Aboriginal community controlled health organisations (informally) and is designed to develop the underpinning skills within a formal VET framework.

Bowen Basin

Of eight collaborative partnerships identified and reviewed for the case study, none could be described as being driven by a desire by VET or ACE providers to work together to achieve joint goals. However, each of the partnerships involved elements that *brought together* VET and ACE stakeholders to varying degrees. Program partners described a number of initiatives that often formed part of a suite of services funded by a variety of sources, mostly on a project-by-project basis.

Each of the partnerships included a main partner, usually an organisation that provided or auspiced funding, and several other organisations that played a variety of roles. These roles included but were not exclusively related to VET or ACE provision. The lead agencies tended to be either a large company or a government-funded (local or state) organisation. The education stakeholders ranged from universities, VET training providers, ACE-oriented providers, through to schools. The ACE and VET components of the partnership activities were difficult to differentiate. It was apparent that some VET providers, such as Central Queensland TAFE, were providing a mix of VET and ACE training, while the ACE providers, such as Learning Network Queensland, were doing likewise. Funding and the strategic direction of the partnerships determined the nature of provision.

Key findings across the case study sites: Context, extent and nature of VET/ACE collaboration

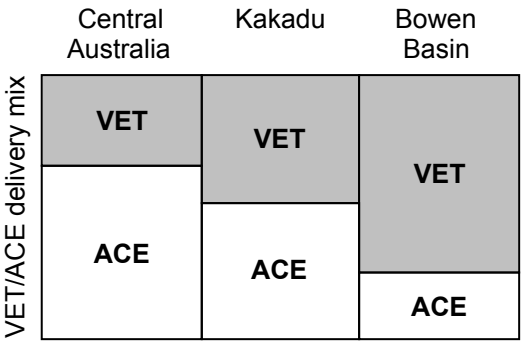
The following sections briefly describe findings for each sub-question of research question 1 as outlined in the chapter 'Introduction'.

The role of context

The regional contextual data shown in table 2 highlight in part the unique characteristics of each site in terms of demography, industry and participation in education and training. Furthermore, the importance of these contextual variables, along with those that are more difficult to quantify in a table, such as the cultural, historical and governance/government structures within the sites, are also reflected in the interview data. The impact of these contextual factors goes well beyond just providing a benign backdrop to partnerships that are created. These factors contribute both positively and negatively to the outcomes of partnerships and qualitatively to the way they operate, and reflect the 'situational' nature of outcomes in partnerships discussed in the literature.

In terms of the VET–ACE collaboration that occurs within partnerships, it is apparent that the mix of formal and non-formal learning that occurs (aligned to what would be the VET and ACE sectors) varies considerably. The mix at each site, represented in figure 2, appears to be dependent on the nature of the site in terms of: the level of labour force participation among Indigenous people; the extent to which mainstream industry plays a role in the economy of the region; and the extent to which the basic human needs (such as health and education) are satisfied. For example, in Central Australia, where much of the training provided is prevocational or preparatory in nature, this proposition is supported by the NCVER data that show a relatively high proportion of 'subject-only' enrolments. In the Bowen Basin it is reflected in a relatively high proportion of the population having certificate qualifications.

Figure 2 Mix of VET and ACE across the three case study sites



This mix of formal and informal representation reflects the diversity of purposes of VET–ACE partnerships identified in the literature. These purposes are shown to be at least partly determined by the community contexts in which the collaborative arrangements occur.

Jurisdictional policies

The strategic and policy direction of vocational education and training is well represented by relevant federal and state and territory departments, along with supporting legislation. In the Northern Territory the relevant legislation for the VET sector is the *Northern Territory Employment and Training Act 2002*, which is administered by the Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training. In Queensland the Department of Employment and Training works under the Queensland *Vocational Education, Training and Employment Act 2000*. The federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations oversees the national post-compulsory education and training policy agenda. The agenda for ACE is not so clearly defined.

In some jurisdictions institutionalised ACE structures are supported by state governments; however, in both the Northern Territory and Queensland no such institutions exist. Yet the need and demand for non-formal (non-VET) training is evident. For example, in the Northern Territory, Indigenous people's comparatively low proficiency in English literacy and numeracy is a significant barrier to participation in formal learning, which requires these essential skills. Nearly 40% of Indigenous people living in remote areas speak English as a second language (ABS 2004) and in desert regions this may be as high as 55% (Guenther et al. 2004). Literacy and numeracy standards among Indigenous primary and secondary school students, particularly in remote areas, are consistently below those of non-Indigenous students across Australia (Charles Darwin University & Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training 2004; Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training 2004). There are, however, numerous examples of partnerships or collaborations, subsidised by government or private funding, designed to promote training and employment for Indigenous people across northern Australia, particularly in, but not confined to, the tourism and mining industries (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources 2004; Department of State Development and Innovation [Queensland] 2004; Indigenous Business Australia 2004; Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships 2004; Allen Consulting Group 2001).

A key element of Queensland's Smart State Strategy is skills development. The strategy states that 'the Queensland Government will use its influence to cultivate a confidence about the importance of knowledge, creativity and innovation to our future' (Queensland Government 2004, p.17). A major focus of the strategy is to upskill the workforce to take advantage of new opportunities in knowledge-based industries and new innovations. However, while the strategy does also discuss 'building a community that cares for its people and fosters and celebrates knowledge and creativity' (p.47), it is not immediately apparent where ACE programs might fit into this vision.

Embedded within the Smart State Strategy is an initiative called Education and Training Reforms for the Future, which is designed to 'provide more diverse and flexible learning pathways, inspire academic achievement and flexible learning pathways' (Queensland Government 2004, p.39).

Queensland's Breaking the Unemployment Cycle program contains specific provisions for employers wanting to employ apprentices in industries with skills shortages (Department of Employment and Training 2004). It also provides incentives for long-term unemployed and Indigenous people wanting to enter the workforce. Within Smart State the focus of the Queensland Government's commitment to adult learning appears to be clearly on adult learning for industry and employment (Department of Employment and Training & Department of Education and the Arts 2004). While the foreword to the policy document, *Adult skills and knowledge for the smart state,* is written in terms of lifelong learning, the direction of the 'commitment' is very much on skills gaps and industry needs. Funding for these ACE programs therefore is firmly tied to employment and economic outcomes rather than community safety, health and development outcomes.

The impact of these jurisdictional approaches to VET and ACE is reflected in the findings from the case studies across the three sites. Firstly, it should be noted that the absence of formalised ACE institutions appears to make no difference to the likelihood of VET–ACE collaboration. Stakeholders in all three sites were able to identify several collaborative partnerships where formal and non-formal learning were brought together for a common purpose. Secondly, the constraints imposed by funding restrictions most certainly shape the nature and direction of the purposes of VET–ACE training collaborations. In Queensland for example, VET and ACE providers' comments reflected the rhetoric of the Smart State Strategy, describing their emphasis on training that enabled people who were otherwise disengaged from the workforce to enter or re-enter employment within their area. Thirdly, the impact of the 'adult learning for employment' approach may mean that providers tend to compete rather than collaborate. This was more evident in the Queensland site where there were several VET and ACE training providers in the same regional market.

Benefits

Across all three sites, the value of VET–ACE partnerships was recognised in a variety of ways. Firstly, partnerships recognised the value of collaboration in terms of the outcomes that were produced as a result of cooperation. The case studies demonstrate that these outcomes were perceived overwhelmingly in terms of the employment opportunities that were created. In the Bowen Basin these opportunities were for women returning to work and for younger disengaged people, particularly those who were Indigenous. In Central Australia, the focus was clearly on the employment skills gained by Aboriginal health workers. In Kakadu, the primary focus was on integration of local Indigenous young people into the workforce. Secondly, the benefits were described in terms of trust and relationships. Effective partnerships were frequently described in terms of the trust that supported them and the trust that was built up as a result of working together. Thirdly, benefits were described in all three sites in terms of the combined resources that the partners brought to the partnership. In some cases this involved the financial and human resources that were applied to the partnership purpose (such as funding from a local employer), but in others it involved the resources that were accessible because of the united approach (for example, in applying for grants). These three groups of benefits reflect the indicators of success identified in the literature in terms of 'partnership work' or 'performance' (Allison, Gorringe & Lacey 2006; Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005) and outcomes for client groups (Kilpatrick & Guenther 2003).

Contribution of existing structures

The evidence from the three sites suggests that the existing *training* structures do not have a positive impact on collaboration. For example, the presence of a technical and further education (TAFE) institute in Emerald was not in itself a catalyst for VET–ACE collaboration in that community. Other training structures such as training packages, the Australian Qualifications Framework, Australian Technical Colleges and other training infrastructures were not mentioned by respondents as being a vehicle for improved collaboration. In Central Australia and Kakadu, where the 'ACE' component of learning was proportionally greater than the 'VET' component (see figure 2), the greatest needs and demands were reflected in areas outside these training structures. However, existing structures that did contribute positively to collaborations and outcomes were related to those

supported by local industry, communities and governments. For example, in Dysart (Queensland) the long-standing presence of a community-based youth training committee established the base for positive partnership outcomes. In Jabiru, the organisational and physical infrastructure offered by a large tourism venture was a catalyst for attracting local Indigenous people into the mainstream workforce. In neither of these examples were outcomes dependent solely on the resources, structures and infrastructure that could have been provided by training providers (ACE or VET).

Research question 2: How do VET/ACE providers collaborate for effective socioeconomic outcomes?

To answer this research question the section first draws on data from the three case study sites and then draws together the common threads of drivers and factors that correspond to the sub-questions. Responses about socioeconomic outcomes were checked against a set of eight OECD (1982) social indicator bands: health; income and wealth; employment; education; leisure; the social environment; the physical environment; and personal safety. It should be noted that 'effectiveness' was defined by the interviewees, not the researchers, and the degree of effectiveness was not a focus of the question.

Interview and case study data

Kakadu

Analysis of data collected from interviews showed that, according to the eight OECD socioeconomic indicator bands, approximately 80% of outcomes reported by respondents were related to work and education. Even with the remaining 20% predominantly related to social outcomes in the immediate or short-term sense, the ultimate goal of the partnerships was directed at either work or education outcomes. In this region goals associated with health, wealth and leisure outcomes were almost entirely absent from partnership goals. If they were mentioned at all, it was in terms of an associated outcome for the whole community, as a result of the achievement of the original goals. Outcomes related to the physical environment and to personal safety did not rate a mention by the respondents. This focus on work and education is entirely consistent with the nature of the collaborations and the context in which they operate. The partnerships are predominantly designed to: engage local Indigenous people of all ages, but especially targeted 'disassociated' youth, with work in the service industries of the region—conservation, mining, administration, health and tourism; focus on apprenticeship opportunities for local youth, which are likely to result in more connection between Indigenous youth and education, families staying in the area longer, as well as increased connection with transient Indigenous families, who tend to move between Kunbarllanjnja and Katherine throughout the year; and satisfy the emerging skills shortages of the industries in the region, particularly now that the mining sector is in wind-down phase.

Central Australia

Respondents identified a number of outcomes resulting from the ACE–VET partnership for the individual, the industry and the community. Firstly, they identified an improved standard of work performance by those participating in the training. These improvements included: updating of skills with the latest techniques; updating the understanding of responsibilities under duty of care; understanding the importance of documentation; and developing a greater understanding of why certain procedures were carried out in a particular way. Secondly, all respondents identified increased levels of confidence by Aboriginal health workers in performing their role. 'Improved career paths' was identified as the third important outcome, where Aboriginal health workers had moved into other health-related areas of work, such as aged care, Stronger Families programs, mental health and alcohol and other drugs programs. Approximately 80% of outcomes were employment-related and 20% were related to education.

Respondents identified a number of areas where best practice principles had been demonstrated. Training was considered excellent when training and assessment was delivered on the job, when it was relevant, when learners were supported, where positive responses were received to requests and where training was delivered at the level appropriate for the learner. In addition, the provision of English language and literacy skills development through the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programs was rated highly and enabled Aboriginal health workers to manage their health worker training better.

Bowen Basin

Analysis of data collected from interviews showed that, according to the eight OECD (1982) bands, approximately 60% of outcomes reported by respondents were related to work and education. About one-fifth of outcomes were related to social outcomes. The remainder were focused on health, wealth and leisure outcomes. Outcomes related to the physical environment and to personal safety did not rate a mention by respondents. The focus on work and education is entirely consistent with the nature of the collaborations and the context in which they operate. That is, partnerships are designed to produce outcomes to: address skills shortages; introduce otherwise disengaged people (for example, women returning to work, 'at risk' youth and Indigenous people) to the workforce; and satisfy the emerging skills needs of industry (particularly coal mining and energy-related industries). The social, health, wealth and leisure outcomes described by partners were generally considered to be peripheral to their expectations. That is, while social outcomes (including trust, acceptance, a sense of belonging and family benefits) were desirable and highlighted, they were a by-product of the partnership.

Key findings across case study sites: How providers collaborate for effective socioeconomic outcomes

The following sections briefly describe findings for each sub-question of research question 2. The research question is divided into two parts: 'what are the features that facilitate/hinder successful outcomes?' and 'what drives the formation and development of effective partnerships and connections?' We begin with a brief discussion of the socioeconomic outcomes identified by respondents. Analysis of the data showed that it was very difficult to separate out 'features' from 'drivers' because they were so closely connected. The next section therefore reflects this close connection and places the features and drivers under the one heading.

What were the socioeconomic outcomes identified by respondents?

Table 4 summarises the range of outcomes of collaborative partnerships described by respondents. Of note in the list is the focus on the partnerships' client group. While respondents were asked to describe outcomes in terms of the partnership itself, they most frequently referred directly to outcomes that were related to the partnership's purpose. While the table gives an indication of the array of outcomes under the OECD (1982) band headings, a conservative estimate would show that at least 60% of outcomes were directly related to employment across the three sites. However, it is unwise to quantify exactly the number of responses under each band, because of the overlapping nature of outcomes as reported.

While the array of outcomes listed above is heavily weighted to employment and educational outcomes, they are largely consistent with those identified in the literature (see literature review). In particular, the range of outcomes could be matched to the Clemans, Hartley and Macrae (2003) matrix of personal, community and economic development outcomes. Furthermore, consistent with findings in the literature about the role of partnerships in meeting community outcomes (for example, Kilpatrick, Fulton & Bell 2001; Kilpatrick & Guenther 2003), the outcomes listed in the table reflect, to a large extent, the broad range of community needs relevant to the case study site contexts.

Table 4 Socioeconomic outcomes from partnerships identified by stakeholders

OECD Indicator band	Outcomes from partnerships identified by respondents
Health	Community health promotion
	Mental health improvements, reduced stress
	Improvements in general individual and community wellbeing
Command over goods and services (including income and wealth)	Improved business performance and competitiveness
	Better use of (and sharing of) community resources
	Improved access to external financial resources
Employment and quality of working life	Improved job performance and job satisfaction
	Improved cooperation within and between workplaces
	Access to employment for disengaged youth
	Improved career pathways for youth
	Access to mainstream employment for Indigenous people in remote communities
	Better job preparation for labour market entrants
	Access to jobs for women re-entering the workforce
	Greater participation in voluntary work
	Increased self-confidence, motivation and self-esteem to re-enter the workforce
Education and learning	English language, literacy and numeracy improvements
	Access to formal VET qualifications
	Access to skills (in general) and life skills for training participants
	Training delivery
	Personal recognition of value of learning
Time and leisure (including culture)	Social activities, connectedness
	Activities for youth
Social environment (including family and community)	Acceptance and belonging, community recognition
	A more liveable community, increased mutual community support
	Improved family connectedness
Physical environment (including housing)	No outcomes identified
Personal safety (including crime and justice)	No outcomes identified

Features and drivers of effective collaborative partnerships

The data suggest that there are five key features and drivers that contribute to effectiveness. These are described below under headings of leadership (brokering); leadership (local shakers and movers); relationships and trust; local resource-sharing; and access to external resources. Each of these features/drivers is interdependent to some extent.

Leadership (brokering)

Two broad kinds of leadership were described in interviews as being critical to the formation and ongoing development of VET–ACE partnerships in all three sites. The first type of leader played a brokering role, often at the regional level. This type of leader is seldom described in the literature on learning partnerships, but is perhaps best represented by the kind of leadership described by the OECD (2006, p.64) as the 'convener' or 'organiser of a 'regional skills alliance'. This is probably because this kind of leader is not necessarily directly involved in developing learning programs; rather, they stand outside training provision and are more likely to be associated with regional development processes. In terms of the brokering role, leaders involved in partnerships were described as 'visionary', 'advocates', 'community champions' and 'proactive'. In a major regional Queensland city, for example, the head of a regional development agency was able to clearly articulate the needs of the whole region. Furthermore, she was able to draw together the key stakeholders from industry, community and the training sector within the region to respond to the needs. In addition, she was also able to effectively engage with people at a state and local government level in order to access significant government support. Within her own region she was

able to garner the support from large organisations—including a TAFE institute, a university, and regional media organisations—in order to facilitate the goals of the partnership. The interviews did not show one example of a training provider who fulfilled this role of 'broker'. In Central Australia it was the Aboriginal leadership in the primary health care industry who lobbied over five years for the establishment of a regional partnership, culminating in the establishment of the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services. These leaders developed the 'vision' of how an appropriately delivered educational model would work in the remote community context.

Leadership (local shakers and movers)

The second type of leader was characterised as someone who got things done in the local community. These leaders provided a local coordination role and interfaced with the brokers. They were results-oriented, focusing on outcomes for their local community. They were also described as networkers who were continually building relationships with people both within the partnership but also in the community. These kind of leaders are frequently described in the literature as 'enablers' (for example, Falk & Mulford 2001; Kilpatrick et al. 2001). These leaders were able to foster a sense of cooperation among key community members. These leaders came from a variety of backgrounds and included some training providers. For example, one ACE provider in the Bowen Basin described how she fostered relationships with key people from local government, while at the same time being very focused on the need to expand the program she was involved with so that local community needs could be satisfied. Within the remote community context of Central Australia the Aboriginal Community Controlled Primary Health Care Services were led by either managers or boards who were perceived as elders in the community and who had the authority to represent the needs of their community. This was important to the integration of education and training delivery into the primary health care services.

Relationships and trust

Relationships and trust were frequently described as underpinning the development of ACE–VET partnerships in each of the sites. The relationships were supported by a combination of formal and informal reporting. Larger institutions tended to rely more on the formal aspects of communication than smaller community-based groups. Formal relationship structures such as boards and committees supported the less formal relational aspects to the partnerships and were seen to be necessary in order to satisfy the requirements of funding bodies. Consistent with the literature reviewed (for example, Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia 2001; Sommerlad, Duke & McDonald 1998), the trust that was built up over a longer period of time was frequently cited as one of the key features that made a partnership successful. Relationships between trusting individuals were described as being foundational to the sharing of local knowledge and resources. This aspect of relationship-building was expressed in a variety of ways. For example, one mining industry respondent in the Bowen Basin described how she would frequently go out of her way to stop and talk to people, to find out what was happening in the community. In so doing she effectively built strong bridges between the mining company and the community.

Local resource-sharing

The development of strong, trusting relationships between partnership members and local stakeholders is closely related to a fourth key factor—local resource-sharing. While the literature frequently refers to 'resource-sharing' as an outcome (for example, Clayton et al. 2004; Clemans, Hartley & Macrae 2003), the agent of this was less well described. Respondents in our study described how the confidence they had in each other meant that they were more likely to contribute their own time and their organisation's resources for the purposes of the VET–ACE partnership. This confidence was often fostered by the networking offered by the local 'shaker and mover'. In some cases the trust that had evolved among the partnership stakeholders was reported to have made a positive impact on the connections with the broader community, thereby increasing engagement, not only among partnership members, but also among potential training clients. The Kakadu case provides an excellent illustration of this evolutionary dynamic. A partnership involving a local tourism enterprise, which began in 2000, initially had great difficulty recruiting local

Indigenous trainees for accredited training. Over time, as relationships have been developed, there has been a progressive acceptance and commitment to the program among an increasing number of local stakeholders, which in turn has resulted in a greater proportion of local Indigenous people being involved in accredited training, supported by non-accredited training to meet the underpinning skills gaps.

Access to external resources

Consistent with the literature reviewed earlier (for example, Guenther 2005; Seddon & Billett 2004), a final factor that contributed to the effectiveness and ongoing development of the partnership was common to all sites—access to external resources. While this access was to some extent driven by the leader (broker), access to external resources was a product of the combined effort of the partnership as a whole. It is also linked to the solidarity built up as a result of trusting relationships, which enhanced the perceived credibility of the partnership outside the region and gave funding bodies the confidence to offer continuing support for the goals of the partnership. Failure to access external funds was given as a reason for the failure of some partnerships. For example, in the Bowen Basin, one respondent commented on the failure of a partnership involving community literacy training because of funding cuts, which she stated was a direct consequence of the loss of credibility in the partnership by the funding body. In Central Australia, for example, the internal resources of Indigenous communities involved in health worker training are inadequate to meet the high costs associated with the VET and ACE components of the training. The partnership involved in this case provided access to funding to meet these financial requirements and—partly because of the credibility of the organisations involved—provided the ongoing sustainability required to secure future access to external resources.

Research question 3: What can existing/emerging VET and ACE providers do to increase the probability of effective socioeconomic outcomes?

To answer this question, the following section draws together interview and case study data. In particular, the findings from the case studies report on the impact of funding arrangements. The section concludes with a discussion—drawing together data from the three sites—of findings related to the three sub-questions about specific factors that contribute to the likelihood of effectiveness.

Interview and case study data

Kakadu

VET–ACE collaboration in the Kakadu region is not being driven by training providers involved in partnerships. Rather, it is best described in terms of community partnerships providing opportunities for vocational education and training to be delivered, resulting in sustainable employment for local Indigenous people and some specifically targeted 'disengaged' youth. VET and ACE providers are co-opted into partnerships to varying degrees, depending on the goals of the partners and the training context. Specifically, the value of the partnerships' outcomes are related to working together as a team to bridge the divide between the employment opportunities in the region and the employability of the local population in terms of the Western concept of work. Both VET and ACE providers—the latter not identified formally as such—deliver a mix of accredited and non-accredited training, using a mix of formal and non-formal learning strategies. Informal learning strategies, while not explicitly identified by respondents, are embedded in the interactions that result from the developing relationships, as the partnerships emerge and mature. In this way the three forms of learning are used to achieve outcomes for the partnerships' purposes at the Kakadu site.

Where funding is derived from multiple sources, partnerships tend to have the flexibility they need to meet their range of objectives related to the sustainability of the region. It was felt strongly by the respondents that, for the long-term sustainability of the Kakadu region, it was preferable that the local Indigenous population fill the employment needs of the mining, tourism and service industries in the area. This was the holistic objective driving all partnerships identified in the Kakadu region.

The Kakadu partnerships were funded in a variety of ways. Funding sources included federal and territory departments or agencies, a large mining company in the region, Indigenous-focused organisations or associations, like the local Gagudju Association or Gundjeihmi Corporation, and a national example, such as Indigenous Business Australia. The small region, with many well-known players, meant that funds often came from a variety of sources within the one project. ACE was not a recognised sector for funding in this region, but rather an informal set of activities that required funding in order to support the VET training. The ACE component of the partnership was predominantly funded by local businesses—both large and small—and respondents indicated that this meant that the local partners had more influence over the direction and priorities of the programs and were able to be more flexible within certain parameters. This was seen by respondents to be an essential part of a successful program in this region, as many factors, from cultural matters to geographical and meteorological factors, may delay the completion of programs. Those partnerships which were reliant solely on federal or state funding reported that programs suffered from short-term, project-based funding and inflexible deadlines and they had taken the step to ensure that this was not a regular funding pathway for this region to adopt. The partnerships in the region tended to use a number of funding sources to ensure that holistic aims and outcomes were not hampered by short-term bureaucratic policies. Regardless of the context of the programs being delivered or the nature of the funding arrangements, the partnerships were predominantly concerned with a focus on regional sustainability, in terms of employment opportunities for local Indigenous people, especially young people.

Central Australia

This regional collaborative model, bringing together Aboriginal communities, the primary health care industry, government departments and the ACE–VET provider, works well to address the complex needs of Aboriginal people in remote Australia. It allows the development of both ACE and VET provision in tandem with local and individual needs, which determined the delivery content and mode. An illustration of the dynamic interplay between the three forms of learning is given in an example that involves mentoring in the process of training of Aboriginal health workers. As senior Aboriginal health workers become qualified through the formal processes of training, they also take on the role of mentor for newer trainees, performing a non-formal teaching and learning function. However, the reason this is accepted so readily in communities is that existing kinship structures give authority to those who fill those senior health worker roles. In this example, the kinship structure provides at least one interface for the informal learning to occur.

The delivery by the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services spans the ACE–VET areas and is funded by the federal Department of Health and Ageing and the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services. As the delivery is most often one-on-one, delivered in remote locations and over a long period of time, the funding required is much higher than that normally found in either ACE or VET in any state or territory. Respondents saw the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services model working well, particularly for Aboriginal people in remote Central Australia. This model would be difficult to replicate without sufficient funding.

Bowen Basin

VET–ACE collaboration in the Bowen Basin is not being driven by training providers involved in partnerships. Rather it is being driven by the needs of regional development organisations, industry and, to some extent, by the strategic policy direction of the Queensland Government. VET and

ACE providers are then co-opted into partnerships to varying degrees, depending on the goals of the partners. The context (which includes skills shortages) and the nature of collaboration prescribe the vocationally oriented outcomes. Both VET and ACE providers deliver a mix of accredited and non-accredited training, using a mix of formal and non-formal learning strategies. Funding arrangements have an impact on the freedom of providers and partners to drive the agenda of the programs with whom they are involved.

The Bowen Basin partnerships reviewed were generally funded in one of two ways. The funding source was either a large mining company and/or a government agency (local or state). Stakeholders in receipt of funds from the former source reported a large degree of freedom about the use of those funds within an agreed framework. Those receiving funds from government agencies tended to be more constrained by funding conditions. This was particularly the case for ACE providers, who were under some pressure to 'massage' their outcomes to fit the vocational criteria specified as part of funding arrangements. Company funding arrangements were long-term in nature. One partnership arrangement had been in operation for about ten years. Programs funded (wholly or partially) by local government stakeholders were often project-based, although a degree of continuity was achieved through the continuing support of shire council partners. Those partnerships which were reliant almost wholly on state government funding reported that programs suffered from short-term, project-based funding, which was sometimes at risk of being cut because of a failure to meet requisite outcomes prescribed by program criteria. In general terms partnerships funded by a company had the most influence over the direction and implementation of programs. Local government partnerships (where the shire council provided funding) tended to be driven by the mutual interests of the stakeholders, often through a regional/community development body. Partnerships dependent on short-term project-based funding from state government sources tended to have the least control over training provided. Regardless of the nature of programs delivered, the context of industry skills needs and regional skills shortages underpinned the outcomes of the partnerships reviewed.

While collaborative partnerships in the Bowen Basin relied heavily on the formal structures of VET to produce effective outcomes, there was also strong acknowledgement that other learning processes were important. One example serves to highlight this. A government-sponsored regional development organisation based in Rockhampton, in collaboration with a range of industry and training partners, identified a number of skills shortage areas in the process of developing a strategic plan for the region. These skills shortages were linked to formal VET qualifications (for example, black coal competencies), while gaps in the profile of potential trainees were addressed through less formal means (for example, literacy and numeracy programs). However, a respondent representing this partnership made an interesting comment as she described the process: she described the learning that happened within the partnership, 'as if by chance'—in other words 'incidental' or informal—as the various partners contributed to the development of the partnership's purposes. Here—as with the other two case study sites—we see the interconnections between the three forms of learning.

Key findings across the case study sites: Increasing the probability of effective socioeconomic outcomes

Respondents across the three sites discussed several ways that the likelihood of effective outcomes could be increased. These are divided into: aspects of the partnership; aspects of policy, funding and administration; and aspects of the provision context.

Aspects of the partnership

Several aspects of the partnership contributed to the probability of successful outcomes across the three sites. The importance of effective *communication* between partnership stakeholders was identified as one of these aspects. Respondents spoke about the importance of both formal and informal channels of communication, in terms of good reporting arrangements; established

protocols; maintaining 'friendly' relationships; regular contact; and good publicity. In Central Australia, for example, communication was made easier through the strong partnership and governance arrangements of the Aboriginal leadership and their communities. This was seen as essential for successful education and training delivery.

Recognition of the *mutual benefits* that accrued from participation in the partnerships was also considered to be important for success. This was described in terms of mutual support; hitting the right political buttons; and a recognition of the shared goals of a particular community. Closely aligned to this is the importance of 'trust', which was seen as a critical component of relationships that work towards 'a common vision' (see also the earlier section, Relationships and trust).

Understanding and addressing the needs of other partners and the broader community was also considered by many to be integral to successful partnership outcomes. The community needs were dependent entirely on the context of the community. In most cases a partnership was built around a purpose. In turn, the purpose was dependent on need. For example, in most Bowen Basin partnerships the purpose was addressing skills shortages. Successful partnerships then went about addressing the needs of industry and of the community in order to fulfil its purpose. Training providers, as integral stakeholders in partnerships, were instrumental in finding ways of meeting those needs. For the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services the delivery required responsiveness to the needs of not only the individual but also the workplace and the community. This meant negotiating on a regular basis and maintaining extreme flexibility in provision. The ability to respond was supported with the long-term commitment by all partners.

A final aspect that contributed to effective outcomes was related to *getting the right people* to perform the partnership functions. Failure to find an appropriate networker or coordinator, for example, was given as a reason for failure to achieve specific outcomes. In the Bowen Basin one partnership reported difficulties in being able to effectively disseminate information about the partnership's goals and activities because of staff turnover and difficulty accessing someone with the necessary information and communication technology and related media skills. In the Bowen Basin particularly, this aspect of human resources was felt to be as important—or more important—than aspects of financial resources (discussed in the next section). High staff turnover in Central Australia has a significant impact on delivery, as it can take 12 months to build relationships and trust with Aboriginal participants in remote communities. The skills and attitudes of the training and education staff are critical to their acceptance, as is their commitment for a long period of time to continue the work in remote communities.

Aspects of policy, funding and administration

Funding was described as both a product of an effective partnership and a condition for effective outcomes. In other words, most partnerships examined required some level of funding—either from within the stakeholder group, or outside, from government and/or non-government sources—in order to achieve their stated purposes. At the same time, many partnerships described how the partnership itself was a catalyst for attracting funding. For example, in Central Australia, the nature of the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services partnership model was reported to be critical for attracting ongoing support from funding bodies. Reliance on one source of funding was considered to be a factor that limited the potential for success. For example, in Kakadu respondents reported that a mix of funding from local and government sources gave the partnerships more flexibility to deliver training that met specific local needs—particularly for the necessary non-formal components of the training.

Respondents reported that *government policy* was both a factor that inhibited and promoted effective partnership outcomes. For example, in the Bowen Basin, the government's Education and Training Reforms for the Future strategy, with the accompanying District Youth Achievement Plans, provided a useful framework in which several regional partnerships and stakeholders could work to achieve outcomes that met industry and community needs (see also section, Jurisdictional policies). On the other hand, at the same site, the administration of some policy initiatives with the

accompanying 'bureaucratic red tape' were factors that respondents felt inhibited the effectiveness of outcomes. Generally, regional VET–ACE partnerships at each site worked within the frameworks developed by relevant federal, state and territory governments. This made them vulnerable to changes in those policies and strategic directions. This vulnerability was to some extent mitigated by effective relationships between partnerships and governments. Often it was the leader, acting as the broker in a partnership, who facilitated the maintenance and development of these important partnership–government relationships to ensure ongoing funding. For example, in the Bowen Basin, through this process, the Upskilling the Highlands program is now in its third iteration of funding.

Aspects of the provision context

While many of the principles of practice identified are not site-dependent, it was apparent that the unique attributes of the provision context, even within each site, made a difference to the probability of effective socioeconomic outcomes. In particular, the mix of formal and non-formal/informal activities (see figure 2) present within each site is critical. In many cases the non-formal learning activities supported the formal (see table 5). Two examples help illustrate this point: first, in the Bowen Basin, the non-formal learning associated with developing literacy and numeracy skills for students (and parents indirectly) directly supported the formal provision of VET in Schools, which in turn increased the reported likelihood of uptake of formal VET qualifications associated with coal mining. Second, in Central Australia, mentoring (non-formal) supported trainees to achieve their Aboriginal health worker qualifications. In Kakadu, provision of underpinning literacy and numeracy skills increased the likelihood of success for Indigenous trainees undertaking certificate qualifications in tourism and hospitality. In each case the partnership stakeholders facilitated this mutually supportive mix of learning through networks and access to resources.

Table 5 Getting the mix right: Aspects of the provision context contributing to effective socioeconomic outcomes

Site	Typical VET activities	Typical ACE activities
Bowen Basin	Formal qualifications for apprenticeships and traineeships in mining and associated industries	Pre-employment training for women and disadvantaged youth
	Industry-based occupational health and safety training	Community-based information and communication technology training sponsored by mining companies with a goal of making more 'liveable' mining towns for workers and their families
	VET in Schools provision for entry qualifications	Non-formal literacy and numeracy skills development for teachers, assisting students and parents to achieve benchmark literacy and numeracy standards
Central Australia	Formal qualifications for Aboriginal health workers	Non-formal delivery and informal learning related to underpinning skills required by Aboriginal health workers and partner organisations
	Training for community emergency response (such as lighting flares on a runway)	Non-accredited training targeted to meet individual needs, such as English language and literacy skills
		More experienced Aboriginal health workers mentoring newer staff
		Community development orientation
Kakadu	Certificate qualifications for local Indigenous people wanting to work in tourism and hospitality industries	Underpinning literacy and numeracy skills, time management, banking, filling in forms, basic information and communication technology training
	Specific workplace skills, occupational health and safety, bar, room service and front desk skills	Provision of drivers' licence training
		Cultural awareness training

Summary of findings

Drawing on the data from the preceding sections we now summarise the findings. Making use of Mattessich, Murray-Close and Monsey's (2004) definition adopted in the literature review, we preface our findings with an assumption that collaborative partnerships involve mutual benefit, and well-defined relationships and common purpose. Following D'Amour et al. (2005), we also recognise the dual nature of collaboration as process and structure.

Finding 1: We found that collaborative partnerships are driven by a common purpose. However, an imposed purpose leads to unhelpful outcomes for individuals and communities. If the purpose could be defined collaboratively, more on the basis of community needs, then VET–ACE partnerships might successfully address these, as well as opening the door for sustainable enterprise and employment opportunities. A prominent example of a community need from one region was related to domestic violence and community safety issues in Central Australia.

Finding 2: In the case study sites of this research, partnerships are driven by industry and the community—not by training providers. Training providers are integral to the partnership purpose, but are not the key drivers. This does not suggest that providers cannot or should not drive partnership formation.

Finding 3: Working in collaboration does produce benefits—particularly for disadvantaged clients. In many cases the partnership purpose delivered benefits well beyond the requisite employment benefits demanded by funding constraints. The benefit of collaborating was often expressed in terms of the intrinsic value of sharing towards a common goal.

Finding 4: Collaborative partnerships provide the continuity and longevity required for the successful evolution of relationships. That is, the trusting relationships that develop over a period of time form the basis and facilitate the evolution of partnership structures. Here we see a distinction between collaboration as both a process and a structure.

Finding 5: We observed that effective leadership is not a generic or uniform set of attributes—leaders have different functions, depending on their partnership role. Leaders were identified as either 'brokers'—visionary people with access to external people and financial sources—or 'local shakers and movers'—people who get things done within their community, fostering networks and accessing local resources.

Finding 6: The mechanisms of the VET system, such as training packages, are most often used as tools to achieve the common purpose—not as ends in their own right. The formal structures of training are not central to the purpose of the partnership. They are however used strategically to meet needs identified by the partnership.

Finding 7: The effectiveness of collaborative partnerships is determined more by the purpose than by the partners. The nature of the partnership's purpose determines the effectiveness of outcomes, ahead of the individual interests of each stakeholder group.

Finding 8: There are three kinds of learning taking place, which in successful programs are necessary to develop and bind the partnership and course outcomes together. These learnings can be described as formal, informal and non-formal.

Implications and conclusions

Implications for practice

For all partners

The implications for all partners lie in the areas of: the VET–ACE mix in relation to purpose; the importance of all three kinds of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) to achieving outcomes; and leadership.

VET–ACE mix in relation to purpose

This project has captured the significance of the VET–ACE mix in various contexts in achieving the purposes set down for them and, to an extent, recognising their impact on broader socioeconomic wellbeing. However, much more occurs in these sites to make the partnerships effective. Identifying the need for training itself is important, as is providing it, but training is part of a package that involves the interplay of the stakeholders and their various activities. Lack of training is often seen as the problem—but there is little to show that, by providing training alone, the problem is solved. The implication of this is that all partners need to leave their organisational baggage at the door and focus on the reason they are there in relation to achieving the commonly agreed purpose.

Three kinds of learning

Formal training is important. Non-formal ACE-type training is just as valid in the process of building socioeconomic outcomes as is formal VET. The two are complementary components of a learning whole which also incorporates informal learnings. As noted in the literature review and reinforced in this research, informal learning activities provide much of the hidden actions that 'glue' or bind the entire course activity together. As such, in each site it is impossible to claim that one type of learning is more important than another, as the mix is context- and purpose-driven. The implication of this is that explicit attention, in terms of planning and resourcing, should be paid to the three kinds of learning in achieving the purpose for the intervention. In addition and not to be overlooked is the need to make these learning activities (that is, the contributions of each of the three kinds of learning) transparent and legitimate. It is time to consider making underpinning skills, such as literacy and numeracy, more explicit in provision—a response to many providers' expressed views, that they currently feel constrained by having to report and 'show' employment outcomes only.

Leadership

We have identified an implication for leadership that stems from the integrated way in which partnerships operate. It was found that different types of leadership need to be accommodated, depending on the stage of the intervention, the stakeholders, and the roles of all concerned in achieving the common purpose. The implication here is that leadership skills, training and development need to be taken into account as part of the planning of the project, recognising that differing styles and types of leadership will be required at different times, for different purposes.

Industry

The key implication for industry practice arising from the evidence is that industry needs to adopt a leadership role in establishing purposeful VET–ACE partnerships for their own ends. It is not sufficient for industry to expect that such arrangements will fall into their sphere of action. Effective collaborative partnerships were driven by either industry or communities, rarely by providers. This implication is intuitive, in that, with all the goodwill in the world, providers would have difficulty anticipating industry needs, while industry has its finger on the pulse. In this respect, it is industry's core business to identify needs and drive collaborations to achieve these. However, the research indicated that industry linkages to their communities are very important in achieving their common purposes. The more these linkages develop into partnerships with trusting relationships, the more likely it is that they will serve the industry's purpose, as well as providing the sustainability that all partners consider valuable.

Providers

For providers, the implication for practice is that their role in effective VET–ACE partnerships is vital; however, it may not always need to be a proactive role. While there is insufficient evidence from this project to suggest, in absolute terms, the respective importance of provider, industry or community in collaborative partnerships, we can say with some certainty that all stakeholders play a vital but differing role in achieving the common purpose. The implication here is for a new way of looking at leadership in relation to the nature of the activities embraced by the purpose of the particular project. That is, there are different types of leadership required for effective partnership projects, depending on the tasks at the various stages. A training provider could well take proactive roles in anticipating the kinds of skills that are likely to be required in a partnership, such as the vital one of leadership, and facilitate partnership activity around planning, development and training for these kinds of skills. Providers also need to be aware that there are three kinds of learning occurring in courses or programs, and roles such as learning brokerage—covering all types of learning—can be important to their ability to engage effectively in partnership arrangements.

Communities

In the collaborative partnerships examined in this project, the role of communities varied from one site to another. The 'community' was usually the source of clients for training and learning (whether ACE or VET), with employment being the key desired outcome. In these cases, the key implication is to make explicit, and cater for, the provision and recognition of the non-formal and informal learning components of effective partnerships. Whether it is the non-formal learning required of clients as they seek information about employment or the non-formal learning required to bring these clients up to speed with job-application or course-application processes, or whether it is the time required for community groups to engage in the informal learning processes needed to build relationships, develop and service the trustful networks that build sustainable partnership outcomes, non-formal and informal learning needs to be made explicit and regarded as central to effectiveness. This implication carries resourcing implications for policy (see below) and research implications (see below) as well, since community groups are generally extremely stretched for resources.

Implications for policy

The first and strongest policy implication lies in the issue of resourcing relevant purposes for partnership—whether they need to be employment-focused or otherwise. This research reinforces the point that, while broad socioeconomic outcomes are possible from collaborative partnerships, they are currently generally concerned with employment, with little apparent interest in the huge range of other vital outcomes associated with learning. One site stands out as an example in this regard: Central Australia is a vast area where employment opportunities are falling and where the socioeconomic issues related to domestic and community violence are paramount. Yet VET

funding is targeted towards employment outcomes and seems to have no flexibility to resource those purposes of real concern for particular communities. It has been found that employment is the main focus of learning—especially VET—arrangements because that is what policy dictates. That is, in the evidence we have, other potential socioeconomic outcomes, including domestic and community violence prevention, are being missed. Learning partnerships can contribute significantly to these community health and safety outcomes, and they do respond in some measure, but they are constrained by having an employment focus on activities—because that's the policy. What is implied is a review of the VET and ACE funding model to facilitate flexibility in regard to important community-relevant issues.

Secondly, in all cases reported in the research, community groups, including non-government organisations, play a vital role in the informal learning required for effective partnerships. There are resourcing implications for policy here that may lie in a reconfiguration rather than an increase in resources. Community groups generally have limited resources, yet building relationships, establishing trust and providing continuity is a characteristic of community groups. While building relationships and partnerships could be considered core business for industry and, to a certain extent, providers, it is often an additional burden for community groups. Considering the central role that community groups have in effective partnerships, an implication for government lies in considering resourcing options that would recognise the time spent on roles such as those played by community groups, including the role of industry in assisting with these resources. This implication may also link to issues associated with funding models for VET, as foreshadowed in the first implication.

Issues for further research

The first and most significant area for further research emerging from this project would ask the question: What would it mean to reconfigure funding models to promote VET and ACE to focus on those issues most critical for their communities? This research would be informed by a an NCVER (2006) project on funding models. What is recommended is a trial and evaluation of a training model such as the one extensively trialled and evaluated in Queensland (Department of Employment and Training 2002), wherein ten sites around the state were provided with a structure and process to enable community organisations to purchase training. This involved conducting a community audit of the industry and employment base and of the socioeconomic strengths and weaknesses of the site in question. A plan was then approved for each site to purchase and/or develop its learning needs.

The second most significant issue for further research emerging from this project is that more needs to be known about the role of providers in collaborative partnerships. This project finds no evidence to suggest in absolute terms the respective importance of provider, industry or community in effective partnerships. This project finds that training providers take a back seat when it comes to driving partnerships, while industry and community are at the forefront. This is not to say that providers cannot or should not take a leading role, but there is insufficient evidence to confirm whether or not a key element of effectiveness of partnerships depends on the driver not being a provider. That is, what is, and what should be the role of providers in partnerships?

A third issue for further research involves the leadership required in the collaborative partnerships examined in this research. We have identified that there are two different kinds of leadership in these arrangements, but the project did not explicitly seek information on leadership as a necessary enabler of partnerships.

Trust and strong relationships appear as the single most prominent characteristics of the networks and partnerships examined. The fourth area for research would seek to clarify the roles of trust and strong relationships, particularly in relation to social capital, and suggest what might constitute best practice in developing and maintaining these characteristics in collaborative partnerships. The

development of a set of attributes or processes to be built into partnership arrangements as a guide, or even as criteria to be addressed in funding arrangements for projects, is a potential product of research on this issue.

Conclusion

This research project has examined the ways in which collaborative partnerships between VET and ACE can improve industry, community and socioeconomic wellbeing. While the distinction between VET and ACE implies two discrete 'sectors', the partnerships reviewed in the three sites used for this research showed that such discrete sectors are hard to find. The two sectors are represented by a mix of industry, education and training, and community and government stakeholders, all of which play a role in supporting a continuum that extends from informal, to non-formal, to formal learning.

The findings illustrate the mechanisms that already exist in three regions of Australia for effective VET–ACE collaborations in achieving a range of socioeconomic outcomes for individuals, communities and industries. They also shed light on the extent and nature of the VET–ACE connections, in terms of provider types and relationships, and the rationale for collaboration. Finally, in the section on the implications of the research, processes and practical steps are identified that stakeholders can apply to maximise the effectiveness of learning outcomes. The research identified several examples of effective VET–ACE collaborative partnerships that produced an array of socioeconomic outcomes in each of three sites: Kakadu and Central Australia in the Northern Territory and the Bowen Basin in Queensland. The outcomes were predominantly described in terms of employment. In the Queensland site, for example, partnerships were focused on meeting the skills needs of the mining and associated industries. In Central Australia the main purpose of the VET–ACE partnership examined was to provide health worker skills. In Kakadu the primary purpose of partnerships was with engaging young Indigenous people in service industries associated with conservation, mining, administration, health and tourism.

In this concluding section, it is also useful to recall the mission statement of the national VET system, which is 'to ensure that the skills of the Australian labour force are sufficient to support internationally competitive commerce and industry and to provide individuals with opportunities to optimise their potential' (ANTA 1998). In balance, the research reported here finds strong support for the capacity of VET, through partnerships with ACE, to ensure that the labour force has relevant skills for locality-specific needs. The evidence from the research, however, identifies a gap for that part of the mission which is 'to provide individuals with opportunities to optimise their potential'. Meeting this aspect would allow the dots to be connected to the other components of the broader national mission. If the role of the national system includes the planning and delivery of useful and productive vocational training and learning for people in their respective communities and regions, then a strong implication of the research is for a change in the current VET policy. In addition to requiring employment outcomes, policy should support funding flows aimed at filling identified community needs, such as domestic violence prevention and community safety, at a community or regional level. As noted earlier, at least one trialled and evaluated model exists for such a model in the Australian context. In contexts where employment is scarce, this model also has the potential to build sustainable and relevant employment opportunities relating to the community and regional focus. However, the research indicates that a review of policy and associated funding in this area should also ensure that the three types of learning—formal, non-formal and informal—are explicitly planned and resourced in order to produce opportunities for improving the socioeconomic wellbeing of communities, addressing relevance and skills shortages for industry, and optimising individuals' capacities to establish and maintain a meaningful role.

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Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Examining learning partnerships in northern Australia: Support document—VET/ACE connections literature review* and *Examining learning partnerships in northern Australia: Support document—VET/ACE connections statistical profile*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1972.html>. They contain the following information:

- Literature review:
  - Definitions of ACE and VET: In context
  - Outcomes of VET and ACE: Evidence from Australia and internationally
  - ACE/VET contexts in northern Australia
  - ACE/VET connections
  - Conclusions
- Statistical profile:
  - Introduction
  - Statistical profile methodology
  - Sites
  - Regional indicators
  - Implications and conclusions

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