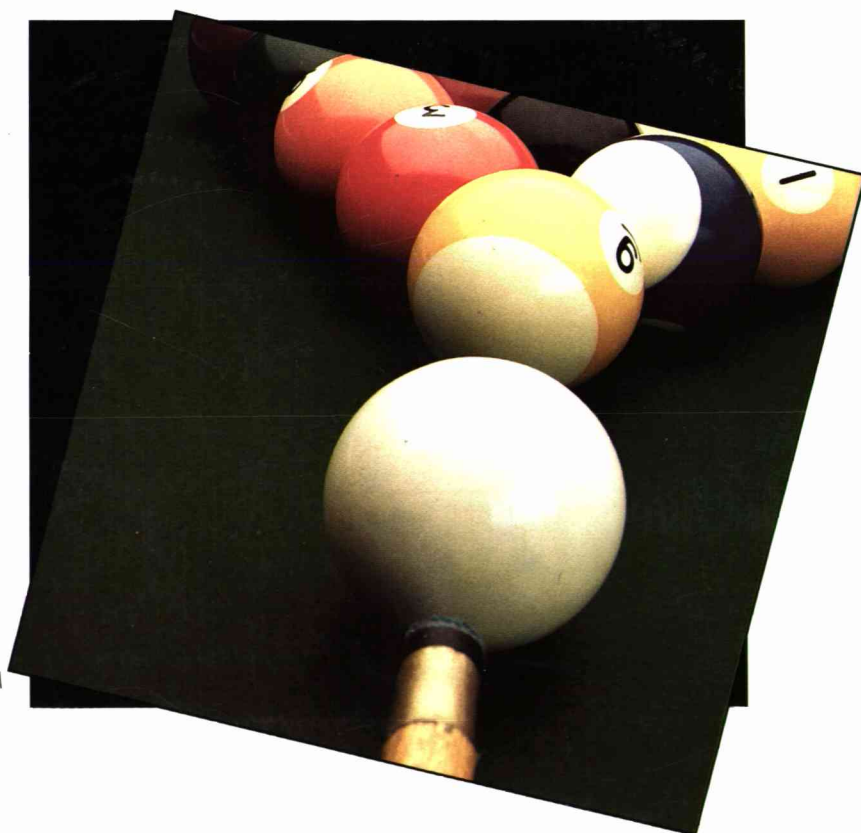


The **impact** of **R&D** on VET decision making

A range of case studies



EDITED BY
CHRIS SELBY SMITH

 **NCVER**



The impact of R&D on
VET decision making:
A range of case studies

Edited by
Chris Selby Smith
Monash University–ACER Centre
for the Economics of Education and Training

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PREFACE

The Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) is a joint venture of Monash University and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), now in association with the Department of Vocational Education and Training (DVET) at the University of Melbourne. CEET's work focusses on the contribution of education and training to economic and social development and the implications for education and training of the changing nature of the Australian economy. Much of CEET's research is concerned with improving the knowledge base for policy development and implementation.

CEET works to annual research and dissemination programs, which detail research projects and activities to disseminate CEET's research and the relevant work of other researchers. Dissemination activities include a seminar series, conferences and workshops. CEET acts as a resource to other researchers, providing advice where needed. CEET also undertakes projects in partnership with the education and training community, with enterprises, and with a range of other individuals and organisations. CEET publishes working papers, research reports, monographs, chapters, journal articles, collections of papers and a newsletter, the CEETSHEET. It also maintains an active website (www.education.monash.edu.au/centres/CEET).

CEET has four co-Directors – Associate Professor Gerald Burke, Faculty of Education, Monash University, Executive Director; Dr Phillip McKenzie, Principal Research Fellow at ACER, and the Director (Programs) of CEET; Professor Leo Maglen, Head of the Department of Vocational Education and Training at the University of Melbourne and founding President of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association; and Professor Chris Selby Smith, Department of Management at Monash. There are also six Research Fellows: Damon Anderson, Fran Ferrier, Sonnie Hopkins, Michael Long, Jeff Malley and Chandra Shah. Associate Professor Julian Teicher, Deputy Director of the National Key Centre for Industrial Relations at Monash, is an Associate of the Centre.

CEET has an Advisory Board, chaired by Professor Peter Karmel, which receives reports on the Centre's activities, staffing and finance, and which offers advice to the Centre. CEET also seeks advice from a VET Advisory Committee, which includes members from industry training boards, private providers of VET, TAFE Institutes, the Australian National Training Authority, members of training authorities, industry bodies and other research organisations.

I express my appreciation to the authors of the seventeen case studies for their co-operation in preparing their case studies, and for contributing more generally to the overall project. The authors retain the copyright to their individual chapters. Also it is a pleasure to acknowledge the valuable assistance provided by Toni Borrett in preparing the material for publication.

July 1999

C. Selby Smith

INTRODUCTION*

Chris Selby Smith

Does research and development (R&D) have an impact on decision making in vocational education and training (VET)? If so, through what pathways?; and if not, why not? These questions have been of interest to policy makers, practitioners and researchers, both in Australia and overseas. For example, the recent review of VET research centres for the Australian National Training Authority noted that key stakeholders assessed the \$1 million spent annually as 'having little or no impact', although 'when the actual work of individual centres was discussed there was some recognition that useful work had been done' (Taylor, 1999, pp. 6-7).

Previous studies have shown that the relationships between R&D and its decision-making outcomes are almost always complex and not easily discerned. The idea of a one-to-one relationship between research studies and decision making generally has been discredited, although individual studies may have an impact. The R&D system's major contribution to decision making may be through the 'big ideas' which are in good currency, often with a considerable time lag. There are many sources of R&D, many potential uses for R&D in decision making and many potential pathways between researchers and decision makers.

The seventeen case studies in this book are complementary to the book which was published by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research last year (Selby Smith, Hawke, McDonald and Selby Smith, 1998). They grew out of a consultancy advertised by the Research Advisory Council of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTARAC) in April 1996 to 'review the evidence for and where possible evaluate the extent of influence of research in vocational education and training'. The Council indicated that it was interested particularly in the impact of research in relation to policy and planning, and practice and performance (and, to a lesser extent, community relations).

The research consultancy was awarded to the Monash University—ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET), with Chris Selby Smith as the Chief Investigator, in association with the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training (RCVET) at the University of Technology, Sydney. The authors were Chris Selby Smith (CEET), Geof Hawke and Rod McDonald (RCVET) and Joy Selby Smith (a private consultant). The two quantitative studies, an analysis of Australian research on VET between 1988 and 1996, and the semi-structured telephone interviews exploring the use of research by VET decision makers, were undertaken by RCVET. Two chapters on these matters were prepared by them for the final report (chapters 4 and 5 respectively in Selby Smith et al., 1998).

The research team proposed, in its 1996 tender to ANTARAC, which was accepted by the funding body, that the research question should be examined from five complementary perspectives: a review of relevant literature, noting that there is no single approach to the issue of the impact of research, either generally or specifically in VET; a symposium, to identify issues promptly and draw on different perspectives and approaches; quantitative studies to provide information on the scope and nature of the impact of R&D on VET; case studies; and a reference to overseas experience and perspectives, with a paper setting out preliminary findings circulated to informed overseas commentators, and with their responses incorporated in the final report.

A consistent approach informs the different perspectives used in this project, including the case studies (see Selby Smith et al., 1998, chapters 1 and 2). There is acceptance of differences between the R&D and decision-making domains, and of the importance of linkages between them. Thus, analysing the extent of research's influence on decision making in VET, and the pathways through which it operates, necessitates consideration of three areas: decision making, R&D and the linkages between them. Also, a distinction was drawn between 'use', which refers to whether the R&D had served a particular purpose, and 'influence', which referred to whether the R&D had made any difference to the decision which was taken. Of course, the relationships between research and

* The comments on an earlier draft by Phillip McKenzie, John Power and Kenneth Wiltshire were much appreciated. Any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor.

decision making can be considered primarily from the perspective of R&D or from the perspective of decision making and action. The latter perspective is generally adopted here, since earlier studies have indicated that the R&D perspective can narrow the investigator's focus, overstating research's impact (the 'key hole' problem) and underestimating the complexity of decision making.

The case study component was viewed as an essential element of the overall project since surveys and case studies, taken together, allow for a more complete understanding of the relationships between R&D and decision making than either can alone. Surveys and case studies build on the advantages and tend to offset the disadvantages of each other. Thus, case studies allow for a greater depth of understanding of the relationships between R&D and action; and of the processes through which the relationships occur. Contact can be made with the parties involved, a range of perspectives can be explored and relationships can be understood more fully. While analysis from surveys may be shallow compared with that from case studies, it can be difficult to generalise from case studies, especially when the nature and contexts of particular research projects are very different. Surveys have the advantage of facilitating familiarity with a wide range of material, enabling common elements to be identified quickly, and the development of generalisations about the project as a whole.

The report to the funding body was submitted in December 1997 in two volumes. The first volume, the report proper, was published by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research during 1998 (Selby Smith et al., 1998). In that book, chapter 3 set out the symposium objectives, structure and broad outcomes, together with summaries of the individual sessions. A fuller report of the symposium presentations and discussion has also been published (Selby Smith, 1998). Volume 2 of the December 1997 report to the funding body contained nine case studies, which explored the influence of the factors identified in the literature and at the symposium in the context of particular situations. Those nine case studies and eight additional case studies are included in this book.

It became apparent very early in the research project that certain aspects of the study required careful consideration. Key terms required definition; and the scope of the study needed to be set down. Agreement on these matters assisted in determining the overall perspective of the project and its boundaries. It also enabled concepts to be applied consistently across the five main phases of the consultancy. For example, it was necessary to define: 'research'; the three areas of decision making and action which were the focus of the commissioning body's concern (i.e. policy and planning; practice and performance; and community relations); the 'impact' of research; and vocational education and training, the area in relation to which the decision making and action takes place. The scope of the study needed to be determined in terms of the boundaries of VET research; its geographical limits; the research time frame; and the disciplinary approach adopted, since this can influence, *inter alia*, the problems identified as important, the key questions posed, the techniques adopted to investigate them and the links with decision makers. These preliminary discussions resulted in the document at Attachment 1, which was widely distributed, including to case study authors.

The selection of the seventeen case studies included in this book occurred in two phases, initially in early 1997 as part of the project commissioned by ANTARAC, which had to be completed by December 1997, and subsequently in 1998 as part of the expanded group of case studies included here. The selection of the second group was more heavily influenced by the research team's thinking about the relationships between R&D and decision making which developed during 1997; and by identified areas of interest which it was not possible to cover adequately in the initial nine case studies.

However, in both phases of the research project four main factors influenced selection of particular case studies. First, it soon became apparent that a large number of case studies would be required if the diverse range of factors which can affect the relationships between R&D and decision making, and thus research's impact on action, were to be properly represented in relation to policy and planning, practice and performance, and community relations. This could not be achieved by the number of case studies specified in the project brief from ANTARAC, 'some half dozen'. A purposeful maximum variation sample was selected, which enabled the project to capture and describe 'the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participant or program variation' (Quinn Patton, 1990), rather than seeking to choose a 'representative' sample.

Taken together, the case studies illustrate the great diversity of circumstances and the variety of ways in which R&D can have an impact on VET decision making.

Secondly, the selection of case studies was affected by ANTARAC's indication that it was particularly interested in the impact of VET research on three areas: practice and performance; policy and planning; and community relations. Although the classification is not entirely straightforward, of the nine case studies undertaken in 1997 three related primarily to policy and planning issues at the level of national, State and Territory policy; four related to decision making at the provider level; and two focussed primarily on community relations aspects. Of the eight additional case studies undertaken during 1998 and 1999 four were at the level of national, State and Territory policy making, two at the level of individual training providers and two concerned with wider community relations aspects. Thus, of the total seventeen case studies in this book: seven relate to the impact of R&D on decision making at the level of national, State and Territory policy; six relate to decision making at the level of individual training providers; and four are concerned with community relations aspects. The Table of Contents shows the classification of each case study. Nevertheless, there remain wide differences between the case studies at a particular level of decision making. For example, at the provider level one case study was concerned with a relatively small, but highly research-oriented private provider, another was concerned with the largest public provider in Australia and a third was concerned with R&D in seventeen different VET providers.

Thirdly, many of the R&D projects examined in the case studies were initiated by users and, hence, may be thought more likely to have a subsequent impact on decision making. As McGaw concluded, 'serious consideration of recommendations is enhanced when education providers are seriously engaged as sponsors of the review'. This applies, for example, to the studies by Chris Robinson of the Kirby Committee's use of R&D in developing the traineeship arrangements, by Susannah Tidemann of Office of Training and Further Education's use of research in developing its strategic plan at the State level, by Hawke and McDonald of the development of the national R&D strategy for VET, by Chris and Joy Selby Smith of the impact of research on user choice decision making in 1996 and 1997 and to the R&D at the level of provider institutions considered by Creek, Jones, Rushbrook and Clemans, Seddon and Clemans, Sefton and Waterhouse, and Trembath. Nevertheless, some projects were initiated by researchers, as in the case studies of Damon Anderson, Peter Dwyer and Barry Golding, and it is of interest whether the mode of initiation affected the subsequent impact on decision making. Researcher-initiated projects may be less immediately visible to decision makers; less easy to incorporate appropriately in decision-making processes; and perhaps more likely to challenge established ways of thinking or acting.

Fourthly, were researchers available and willing to undertake the case studies? The initial nine case studies drew on research projects which had already been undertaken. Most of the case studies were written between the symposium in February and the end of August 1997. Two were undertaken by members of the research team; another was undertaken with an academic at RCVET; three were provided by symposium participants and another originated from a suggestion there; while two emerged out of discussions following conference presentations on the research project. Of the eight case studies undertaken during 1998 and 1999 one resulted from a possible 1997 case study which it had, in the event, not proved possible to complete in time for the December 1997 report. The other seven resulted from personal approaches, based on identified gaps in coverage, known work related to the focus of the project, and expressed interest.

A framework for considering the case studies on a consistent basis was developed to facilitate comparisons and given experience with an earlier project where such an approach had *not* been adopted (see Attachment 2). Each case study author was requested to adhere to the suggested outline and to address the matters raised, as far as possible, without doing violence to the reality of the situation they were investigating. Since it was recognised that individual circumstances could differ widely, authors were free to add or elaborate particular aspects where they felt it was important to do so. Furthermore, given that many of the authors had been closely involved in the subject matter with which their own case study was concerned, they were asked, wherever possible, to draw on external supporting evidence (including from users) in relation to the matters they considered and the conclusions they drew.

Following receipt of the draft case study from each author in the first phase, workshops were held in Melbourne (4 August) and Sydney (29 August 1997). At the workshops, each paper which was available was discussed individually; and then the overall themes which were emerging were identified and discussed. Contributors had the opportunity to revise their case study in the light of the discussions at the workshop, if they wished; and most did so. For the further eight case studies undertaken in 1998 and 1999 a similar approach was adopted, with a workshop being held in Melbourne, on 3 February 1999.

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WHEN THE BACKWASH DWARFS THE WAVE: A CASE STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE CONCERNING TWO-WAY INTER-SECTORAL MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

Barry Golding¹

...good articulation (and transfer policy) is based on a mutual concern for the student's progress, and not on furthering institution prerogatives (Masat, 1979, p. 6).

Seamlessness is now next to godliness in the catalogue of tertiary virtues, but the missions of VET and higher education are distinctive and should remain so ... (Schofield, 1998).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research, primarily by the author as part of Ph.D. studies since 1993, has identified movement from university to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sectors in Australia. This movement was hitherto unknown in research terms, unacknowledged in policy terms and yet clearly well known in practice by the large number of people actually moving. Progressive dissemination of this research, conducted primarily from the perspective of those moving, has had a considerable influence on the thinking about what is now widely acknowledged by State, Territory and national policy makers as two-way movement and recognition between vocational education and training (VET) and higher education.

This case study establishes the setting in which the two-way inter-sectoral movement was originally identified in Victoria, as well as the changing context in which this researcher-initiated study was conducted. It also identifies some of the ways in which VET and higher education policy makers reacted to an emerging knowledge of the dimensions and nature of the movement in a national context.

1. THE CONTEXT

1.1 Background

Research, policy and practice to 1992 in inter-sectoral movement and recognition in Australia (often referred to as articulation and credit transfer respectively) had universally assumed one-way, upward movement *from* TAFE *to* university. There had been a particular emphasis since 1985 on improving recognition arrangements from TAFE to university on the widely held assumption that it was desirable to encourage an 'upward', essentially unidirectional mobility of TAFE students aspiring to university into a closely related field of study at university.

The movement and recognition 'pathways' from TAFE to university were assumed to be intentional and direct. Credit transfer was assumed to be the primary incentive for individuals to change sectors and courses in this manner. The widely accepted policy solution was to set up a series of 'articulation and credit transfer' arrangements from TAFE to university courses within particular fields of study to encourage and enhance the movement and to regularise the associated upward recognition.

These efforts were based on accurate perceptions of inefficiency, ineffectiveness, inconvenience and social inequity for those attempting the transition from TAFE to university. A number of measures had been put in place to monitor and evaluate the 'success' of these 'articulation and credit transfer' routes and arrangements. They included annual monitoring: of the numbers moving to university

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with a 'TAFE background' into particular courses, of the associated levels of recognition, as well as of academic success of 'TAFE background' students relative to other students.

1.2 The organisations

One of the key difficulties in the area of inter-sectoral movement is that both TAFE and university sectors are by no means simple in policy terms. Universities, individually and collectively, value their academic autonomy, and until 1994 had exerted much more influence over the entire articulation and credit transfer agenda: including the research, policy and practice, and regulation of movement from TAFE to university. By maintaining control of both recognition and entry policy in a situation of high demand (until 1990), and also determining and executing the research and monitoring agenda, universities were in the driver's seat.

Universities had therefore been reluctant, without some form of incentive (such as more Commonwealth money or access to more students), to allow decisions about what is fair or equitable in terms of appropriate recognition, to be imposed on them. Nevertheless, universities remained primarily under Commonwealth government funding and policy influence. Through their peak body and political lobby group, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC), universities were being dragged, reluctantly on most occasions, to face the prospect of nationally consistent solutions to what had been seen by the Commonwealth government as inefficient and inequitable inter-sectoral transfer policy and practice.

It was only in 1992, after the prospect of having a National Credit Transfer Agency imposed on universities (and controlled by Monash University and the University of New England), that the AVCC, with joint Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) funding, agreed, as a compromise, to assist with the implementation of its own national system of credit transfer:

AVCC expressed reservations about the appropriateness of an agency which would intervene between higher education institutions and students in the assessment of credit, and explicitly opposed the establishment of an independent award granting authority (AVCC, 1992, p. 2).

This AVCC Credit Transfer Project which flowed from this compromise was, in 1995, subsumed within the Australian Credit Transfer Agency (ACTA), and remained under AVCC control until its demise in 1997.

By contrast, VET, and TAFE in particular, had, until the formation in 1993 of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), been almost totally under State and Territory policy and administration. The prospect of States and Territories uniting to take on universities to assume control over (or even to have a say in) recognition was never a realistic option. TAFE had no control over university entry and no equivalent, high profile, peak lobby group to match the AVCC.

Through the 1990s TAFE was battling to cope with and implement monumental changes associated with, first, the myriad of issues associated with the training reform agenda, and more recently with the National Training Framework and Training Packages. One change which impacted on prospective university entrants in particular included competency-based assessment. Indeed, VET practitioners, enterprises and students had rolled with so many changes and punches in the 1990s that 'There appear few aspects of training or assessment competencies, national frameworks, standards of assessment practices that have achieved significant market penetration, in terms of understanding and application' (Griffin, Gillis, Catts and Falk, 1998, p. 11). This environment of continual change in VET, combined with monumental change in workplaces and for workers, has not been conducive to creating pathways of certainty in work or in transition across sectors in any direction.

Nevertheless, national TAFE to university recognition arrangements were of concern to State authorities, and of research interest to National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and its antecedents as early as 1985 (Parkinson, 1985). Indeed, the prophetic first words in Parkinson's foreword, 'The concept that education is an experience which can continue throughout life ...' might well have come from a 1999 research paper on lifelong learning.

So too were the early words within follow-up research by Parkinson, Mitchell and McBeath (1986) prophetic. That research, commissioned by the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC), began by stating that 'Cross-sectoral transfer is invariably viewed as a one-way movement: TAFE to CAEs [Colleges of Advanced Education] to university. In time the validity of that assumption needs to be tested, but not necessarily in this project' (p. 5). The researchers also briefly but prophetically suggested that future exchange between the sectors might not only be advantageous to TAFE students, but also 'to university students who could complement their law, economics and arts degrees with computer, business and secretarial diplomas thereby increasing their skills base and work mobility' (Parkinson, Mitchell and McBeath, 1986, p. 12).

As Selby Smith and Selby Smith argue in their case study, 'there has recently been increasing Commonwealth involvement [in VET], the Commonwealth Government's influence on policy changes being related to funding, industry pressure and labour market requirements'. With the decision to form ANTA in 1992 (NBEET, 1992), the issue of the traffic between the education sectors assumed national interest.

However, most of the interest in credit transfer, and much of the definitive research, in the 1990s, flowed directly or indirectly from the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), after the Dawkins White Paper proposed 'a set of credit transfer principles to be adopted by institutions within the (recently) unified national system of higher education' (NBEET, 1989, p. iii). At that time:

vested interests within both TAFE and other institutions [were] quite antagonistic to articulation and credit transfer .. Sometimes the arguments put forward in opposition to credit transfer are little more than claims for educational territory, display a frightening ignorance of the facts, and in some cases clearly reject recorded facts (NBEET, 1989, p. 9).

That is not to say that the Commonwealth government through Minister Dawkins, or NBEET and its subsequent credit transfer working party (chaired by Laurie Carmichael), were not pushing the national training reform agenda along. In 1991 the Commonwealth specifically asked NBEET to pay particular attention to the ways in which barriers to credit transfer might be overcome. The attention moved, in the following three years, from credit transfer and skill recognition (NBEET, 1993), to credit transfer and the recognition of prior (informal) learning (NBEET, 1994), to credit transfer and key competencies (Golding, Marginson and Pascoe, 1996).

The underlying arguments were about the potential for simultaneously increasing equity and efficiency. Increasing efficiency would be achieved through students not being required to repeat material they already understood, as well as through the associated cost savings to individuals, governments and the community. Equity would be enhanced by giving 'TAFE background' students opportunities to participate in higher education with advanced standing for prior non-university studies.

The 'balance', between equity and efficiency on one hand, and the 'success' of the policies encouraging credit transfer on the other, was construed as being at the point of marginal efficiency: that is, the point at which former TAFE students granted credit achieved a similar performance to mainstream university students. For this reason, much of the research into credit transfer to that time hinged around this issue of relative academic performance (e.g. Lewis, 1993): in effect whether TAFE students were suitably prepared for university.

In 1993-94 research findings by the author into the nature of the two-way movement began to percolate into the literature. However, by that stage the down turn in demand for university places (which began in 1992) was beginning to bite, and many students who had previously used TAFE as a 'back door' to university in difficult direct entry conditions, were walking straight in the front door without having to go through TAFE.

The net result was that, despite the best efforts of the AVCC, the number of 'TAFE background' students entering university was not growing. Further, the role of NBEET in pushing the agenda along appeared to be diminishing. In a 1994 report, NBEET (p. 2) formed a perception that there were

problems with the newly created TAFE to university credit transfer arrangements, that they were being impeded by 'various factors', and that the newly emerging priority was not more structural recognition arrangements, but 'improvement of communication and trust between the sectors'. This change of policy tack said as much about changes which had already occurred as it did about a change of policy. Something quite different was occurring in terms of movement in the other direction.

1.3 The research

Context

The research conducted by the author which unearthed and actively disseminated the two-way nature of movement between TAFE and university sectors, while inevitably informed by previous research, was in the words of the earlier book (Selby Smith, Hawke, McDonald and Selby Smith, 1998, p. 83) 'essentially serendipitous'. The phenomenon as a Ph.D. topic was fortuitously stumbled upon rather than actively sought out while working at the University of Ballarat (then Ballarat University College) in 1993 (Golding and Eedle, 1993). In its first two years (1993-94) the research was neither commissioned nor supported by any of the above national organisations.

One impetus and 'professional licence' for pondering and pursuing the issue of two-way movement and recognition in an institutional context in the first instance came from one of eight clauses in the Pathways Agreements between Victorian universities and the Victorian government, which required universities to explore programs which promoted greater two-way articulation between TAFE and higher education programs. As a consequence, Victorian universities (particularly the multi-sectoral ones) were generally willing to assist, as were Victorian TAFE institutions. TAFE authorities sensed an opportunity to find out more about the diverse prior study backgrounds of a sub-set of their mature-age clients, and to explore an area they knew little about beyond the level of practice.

Consistent with the University of Melbourne research ethics survey approval, Victorian TAFE institutions and universities which agreed to assist with the research selected a random sample of students crossing sectors and prepared mailing labels. They also met the mailing and re-mailing costs for the questionnaires, and were in return provided with data summaries which related to their own institutions. Only Golding, Marginson and Pascoe's (1996) study for NBEET and the ANTA scoping study (Golding, Bluer and Keating, 1996) were externally funded.

The research was initiated and motivated in part by the author's perceptions that research into TAFE to university movement and recognition were being driven by policy agendas completely dominated by university agendas, out of step with the nature of the movement that was occurring and bearing little relation to the issues which concerned those people actually moving. As Sweet (1992) had argued, TAFE's capacity to simply act as a 'stepping stone' to university was too one-sided and not an adequate basis for a mature relationship. It served to cast TAFE in the role of handmaiden rather than as partner.

It was only after 1995 that sectoral authorities such as the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE) (Golding, 1995a), NBEET (Golding, Marginson and Pascoe, 1996), and ANTA (Golding, Bluer and Keating, 1996) sought advice about evidence of the emerging phenomenon of university to TAFE movement, and sought advice as to its policy implications beyond the bounds of the Victorian-based research. At that point, some of the key implications of university to TAFE movement and recognition began to seep into State and national VET and higher education reports and also began to affect policies and practices.

For reasons outlined in Section 3 below, and partly as a consequence of the research, by 1995 national approaches to credit transfer had come to be seen as a minor subset of cross-sectoral collaboration (NBEET, 1995). NBEET was of the view, at the time of its own demise in 1996, that VET to higher education issues 'are better handled by other bodies such as the Australian Credit Transfer Agency'. NBEET and the Commonwealth government were looking beyond articulated pathways to options such as the promotion of joint courses, co-location, multi-sectoral institutions, cross-sectoral provision and strategic alliances. By the time of the West Report (1997, p. 85), there was a view that 'Higher

education and VET provision increasingly represent *alternatives* for many people as well as *complements* to their current study choices’.

By 1998 ACTA, having realised that national recognition services were not commercial and were best handled closest to the institution and students, had sunk beneath the waves. The specific issues of credit transfer and articulation had virtually disappeared from the policy and research agenda, to be subsumed and swamped by notions of collaboration, partnerships and most recently ‘seamlessness’. A National Policy Research Network was set up at the University of Canberra in 1998, with NCVER, AVCC and ANTA support, to inform consideration of cross sectoral, ‘seamless pathways’ across school, VET and university.

While seamlessness had become a key national policy goal in education and training, the outcomes of that goal were being decided by competitive markets within and between sectors. By 1998 the issue of being suitably qualified to enter university had almost ceased to be relevant. Smaller and regional universities were dredging the very bottom of the school leaver barrel and all post-secondary institutions were seeking new students, preferably with money, from wherever they could be found in Australia or overseas. Greater seamlessness in effect meant that an institution could tap into students from a wider range of sources, including ‘lifelong learners’ conveniently rediscovered and re-created from policies current in the 1970s. It was now possible for students to ‘buy a place’.

By 1998 both universities and TAFEs were desperately trying to find new ways of reinventing themselves in a changing, very unstable and competitive post-compulsory environment. As Butler (1998, p. 10) argued, ‘rhetoric switched from inputs to outcomes; product to process; effectiveness and efficiency, with economic competitiveness, free markets and training all being part of the new mantra in VET’. The success of seamlessness was being defined by Schofield (1998) ‘in terms of individual mobility and dual sector partnerships, not to structure, but to organisational culture, governance, policy priorities and management’.

Schofield, like governments of all persuasions, identified this public policy issue, the dilemma of seamlessness, not in public policy terms, but as a matter of institutions either competing or collaborating. In effect, recognition and movement issues were seen to be driven and resolved not by national policy, but by a convergence of what were seen by Schofield (1998) as weak *individual* drivers (better job prospects, better status, a chance for further study at an individual level). Schofield considered these individual considerations were outweighed by comparatively strong *institutional* drivers (financial considerations, competitiveness and market position, equity considerations, State and Commonwealth funding arrangements).

As Klein (1996, p. 241) argued:

The idea of competition has been grafted onto hierarchical organisational structures. Instability is the inevitable by-product of the tensions between achieving national policy aims and leaving outcomes to be decided by competitive markets.

The individual had again been sacrificed for the greater good of seamlessness; and notions of accountability for public monies spent on VET and higher education had been lost to notions of the competitive market. In a sense, the term ‘seamlessness’ had come to replace ‘articulation’ as the new mantra, which was now regarded as ‘next to cleanliness and godliness in the catalogue of tertiary virtues’ (Schofield, 1998).

In the most recent, backward twist, AVCC and ANTA were, in 1998, collaborating to fund a new credit transfer and articulation consultancy to establish credit transfer and articulation guidelines acceptable to both sectors. It was specifically designed to take account of university entry and recognition policies and practices as they relate to units of competency and training packages following the demise of course accreditation associated with VET qualifications.

Methodology

The inquiry into two-way movement conducted by the author is an example of inductive, grounded research. It involved a specific and fortuitous finding of university to TAFE movement in one locality

and in one course in one State (Victoria), turning out, through close examination of a wide range of movement and recognition data, to be indicative of an important national phenomenon. This examination established the phenomenon as widespread and determined that the scale of 'reverse' movement far exceeded TAFE to university movement. It focussed specifically on a comparison of the perceptions, motivations and experiences of a large sample of people actually moving from TAFE to university and from university to TAFE, by means of mirrored questionnaires.

The surveys, undertaken as part of an in-progress Ph.D., included a pilot survey in 1993, a major survey of two-way movement in one multi-sectoral context in 1994 and a full-scale comparison of two-way inter-sectoral (TAFE and university) movement between four adjacent TAFE and university institutions in Victoria in 1994, as summarised in Golding (1995a). It also included a major follow-up survey including telephone interviews in 1995 (Golding, Marginson and Pascoe, 1996). These surveys were followed by an ANTA commissioned scoping study of the traffic between all post-compulsory sectors (Golding, Bluer and Keating, 1996). While most of the surveys for the Ph.D. were conducted in Victoria, similar trends in university to TAFE movement in other States and Territories were documented in this scoping study, and replicated in Queensland by Millican (1995), nationally by NTCC (1995) and for university graduates in South Australia by Werner (1998).

University authorities were generally less co-operative than State VET authorities in supplying data on commencing students. OTFE (in Victoria) was the main source of VET data on TAFE commencers with prior TAFE backgrounds, and fully co-operated with the research. Not surprisingly, those institutions with most to gain from the research, such as VET multi-sectoral institutions, and TAFE institutions with strong university links, were most co-operative.

1.4 Significance

The research was significant in that it was based primarily on empirical evidence of where and why people were actually moving in both directions between university and TAFE, and for what reasons. Like the research considered in Dwyer's case study, it allowed testing of the assumptions in policy documents against the actual experience of students. As such, it began to identify people rather than numbers moving, and revealed the rich diversity behind apparently simple conceptual constructs such as 'with a TAFE background'. It also identified patterns of movement and transition which were far from linear, and which were often related to work, family or generational cycles as well as to course relationships. Finally, it identified movement on 'pathways' more akin to poorly defined tracks and trails. Many moves were more symptomatic of ambiguous and broken transitions, than they were of pre-planned 'articulation' routes through one course into another.

The most widely cited finding from the author's research in the literature relates to the surprising size of university to TAFE movement. Golding and Eedle (1993, p. 2) first suggested that the 'number moving to TAFE courses with completed higher education is likely to be considerably higher than those moving from completed TAFE to higher education'. By 1994 Golding (1994) estimated that approximately five times as many people with previous university experience were commencing studies in TAFE initial vocational courses as were commencing higher education on the basis of previous TAFE courses. Though the relative size of the two-way flows changed annually and was subject to approximations and estimations associated with missing data, it is the 'size' of the 'reverse' movement that inter-sectoral stakeholders find most significant and tend to cling onto.

It is the unexpected and unacknowledged nature of this movement which is particularly significant to researchers and policy makers. University to TAFE movement was not detected outside of the level of practice in TAFE primarily because it did not fit into the prevailing 'upward' mobility pathways model. While several researchers had anticipated the phenomenon, no one had deemed it important enough to look at the evidence of two-way movement readily available from prior background data routinely recorded at the time of TAFE commencement. It had escaped scrutiny and been difficult to measure to 1993, as NTCC (1995, p. 15) suggested, 'largely because TAFE systems have been previously unaware of, or under-estimated the extent of, university to TAFE articulation'.

Critics of these now widely disseminated estimates of relative movement in both directions (Golding 1995b) point to the unreliability of some data sets and ask whether two-way movement comparisons between TAFE and university are in effect comparing 'apples with oranges'. There is no doubt that

for national comparisons of two-way flows university data on TAFE commencers cannot be simply obtained disaggregated by State. Nor can disparate State TAFE data be simply or reliably aggregated or compared nationally. The author contends that much of the resistance to these estimates lies not in their accuracy, but in the way in which university to TAFE movement, by graduates in particular, challenges established patterns of thought and practice about education and training sectoral and qualification hierarchies.

Behind issues of size of movement lie important findings in the research of the delayed and unanticipated change of field of study associated with much post-secondary movement. This delay and unanticipated change runs counter to much of the pathways policy and rhetoric, and makes it difficult to detect the extent of movement from existing credit transfer statistics or from graduate surveys. There are also methodological problems with relying on either enrolment or survey data. Not the least of the problems involve separating and categorising multiple backgrounds and concurrent enrolments, teasing out the difference between movement and recognition effects, and resolving confusion on the part of students in some institutions as to what sector they were actually studying in or came from (e.g. in multi-sectoral universities like the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology).

The other major, significant finding is that, contrary to previous assumptions, it cannot be assumed that a person moving from a TAFE course to a university course (or vice versa) is 'articulating' in a direct or linear way and that they will necessarily be eligible for (or be seeking) recognition for closely related studies. The author's research clearly showed that a young person commencing in one sector and moving to another in a direct fashion in a closely related field of study is the exception rather than the rule. This finding effectively diminishes the significance and importance of reports of the number of commencers at university with a 'TAFE background'. It similarly diminishes the importance of the idea that people moving in this way were commencing university 'on the basis of' TAFE.

While the original object of the research was a Ph.D., the intentions broadened as the research progressed, and as the findings in Victoria were extrapolated to other States and Territories. The author came to perceive his research role, not as a government policy maker, but as a responsible messenger or interpreter, acting on behalf of the students actually in the process of moving. The author was not a neutral or objective party, and was fired by a perception that there was an untold, emerging and important other side of the one-sided 'story' to tell. The research in a sense provided the plot for a series of short research studies or 'stories', each of which was designed to fit into the larger story, the Ph.D. As with all research, what one decides to study (or not to study) is an indication of both interest and bias.

The author's intention was to 'write from Day 1': in effect, to capture findings and ideas as they emerged, rather than to reconstruct them later. The advantage is that each study or paper tends to be fresh and discrete. The disadvantage is that when assembled, there is some overlap and evidence that the author's terminology, ideas and concepts have changed and adjusted over time.

2. THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR PROCESSES

2.1 Overview

The most independent and most closely related, definitive research on inter-sectoral recognition policy and practice prior to research by the author, by Parkinson (1985), was also originally unconnected to a particular policy agenda, but was quickly taken up by CTEC (Parkinson, Mitchell and McBeath, 1986). The agenda for reform of recognition policy was subsequently pushed along, largely as a sub-set of the training reform agenda, by the Commonwealth government through NBEET, from 1989 to 1995. However, until the mid-1990s the AVCC exerted the substantive influence over inter-sectoral credit transfer and articulation policy, research and practice. The research focus was on academic success of TAFE background students to ensure that they were not being credited 'beyond their depth' in university.

2.2 Activities

ANTA, representing VET, came late to the policy scene, and lacked the understandings built up, and suddenly lost, with the demise of NBEET in 1996. NCVER only re-entered research in this field of study with Werner (1998). There has, as in many State, Territory and Commonwealth organisations, been a demise of independent, internal research and a parallel growth in the use of short, focussed (and often dull, constrained and predictably controlled) external consultancies. This has made broad, fearless, systematic and longitudinal exploration of many research issues a luxury, and run down the potential for research expertise and understanding developing and remaining within policy-making organisations.

Further, it has meant that organisations often commission expensive and arguably wasteful or unnecessary research (e.g. the recent AVCC/ANTA 'Articulation and Credit transfer' project), which appear to ask many of the wrong research questions from false, politically motivated premises and result in reports which are ephemeral in their interest. It had also meant the potential waste of public monies in setting up pilot recognition agencies, ostensibly designed to make university and VET recognition a business rather than an essential service.

Recognition arrangements and agencies are bound to fail, as long as there is no incentive to use them, and as long as there is fear associated with recognition which results in loss of income or teaching time. ACTA, set up through AVCC, cost \$0.5 million and achieved almost nothing. A recent VET 'Consortium Model Assessment Centre' piloted through OTFE (Bateman, 1998) also failed after being launched into 'an environment characterised by competing interest, low levels of understanding and concern over the availability of on-going funding'.

2.3 Decision making

Post-secondary institutions have much control over their own recognition arrangements, but only indirect control (via entry restrictions) over movement. There has been a general relaxation of entry requirements during the 1990s for all but the most prestigious (most vocational) university courses. Articulation (and most recently seamlessness) has come into most favour at times and in situations where institutions need all the students they can get. Generous recognition arrangements have been seen as the attractive and competitive 'icing' on the entry 'cake'. Not surprisingly, the higher status institutions, particularly the 'sandstone' universities, have been less recognition friendly. By contrast, it is in the interests of smaller, more marginal and lower status institutions and sectors to create a sense of seamlessness in terms of both entry and recognition. Industry has generally played almost no role in recognition, though some of the more conservative professional organisations have been very reluctant to embrace recognition of prior learning as part of professional recognition.

The decision-making area is a difficult one for Commonwealth and State policy makers. While enhanced recognition may be more efficient in theory, enhanced inter-sectoral mobility is often associated with multiple awards, credentialism and study 'out of interest'. The most mobile students are often the most educated and most highly qualified. At times of highest tertiary demand, young unemployed people are again displaced, this time from education and training, by older and more highly educated people. The option of choking movement by creating disincentives (e.g. by higher fees or higher HECS) for older people crossing sectors or for 'double dipping' in either education and training sector runs counter to the idea of seamlessness and of lifelong learning.

2.4 Research and culture

Research, however pertinent and extensive, can only partially influence policy. Policy also derives from entrenched cultural and power relationships. Universities, via their close links with DEET, DEETYA (and now DETYA) retain control of a very unequal recognition agenda through the AVCC, particularly since all recognition is conditional on university entry. The universities were until 1995 reasonably united behind the AVCC. For a range of reasons, there is ironically more evidence of self-critical, independent research within VET than in universities.

It is the multi-sectoral institutions which have most readily attracted (and spent their own) funds on research into movement and recognition. Several States have developed their own TAFE-based recognition strategies, though they have conducted only limited quantities of their own research. TAFE NSW, with the largest and most centralised TAFE system, has remained at the forefront of State TAFE recognition policy and practice. Victoria, through the State-funded pathways projects, served to highlight the usefulness of collaboration, particularly within inter-sectoral institutions. The Western Australian Department of Training has from the outset adopted a more collaborative cross-sectoral approach, which has also included schools.

3. RELEVANT RESEARCH

3.1 Overview

TAFE and university are complex, diverse, rapidly changing sectors. Movement between sectors is also complex and diverse. It is undertaken by a wide variety of people for many different reasons. Governments and policy makers often want only simple characterisations of this complexity and diversity in research in order to implement simple (and preferably inexpensive) solutions. The characterisations which are produced by research, even when they are simplified and distilled, may not necessarily be what those who commissioned the research (or who funded its dissemination) want to hear. In the context of rapid change, it is not unusual for a pressing practical problem to have passed into history by the time it is definitively isolated and 'solved' by means of research.

3.2 Details

This research into movement has focussed on people actually moving. In the context of rapidly changing policies and ephemeral programs it offered an alternative, reasonably stable, mirror image snapshot of both movement and recognition. The picture reflects, albeit from a particular and perhaps jaundiced or biased perspective, some of the realities of education and training for people currently in transition. The image often reveals people in programs for reasons which say as much about the ephemeral nature of qualifications, skills and work as they do about the programs themselves and about the recognition associated with them.

The research has very effectively broadened the scope of thinking about inter-sectoral movement and recognition. Though it has clearly influenced policy, it was researcher rather than policy driven. Nevertheless, it has led in part to a rethinking of the idea of universally upward movement consistent with a qualifications hierarchy. It has also led to a realisation that one-way models of movement are not only simplistic: they can be very misleading; and patronising and destabilising of TAFE. Though the research has diminished the importance of recognition as the main 'reason' for movement, it has established university to TAFE recognition as an additional consideration, alongside issues of TAFE teaching styles, course design, services and facilities (Werner, 1998), for the large number of people making that unanticipated transition.

Approximately twenty papers or publications related to a range of issues associated with the topic of university to TAFE movement were authored or co-authored on the topic between 1994 and 1996. Associated print media interest focussed on the superficial, emotive but newsworthy issue of the relative sizes of the two-way movement. While it is this minor aspect of movement that most people tend to remember, it has, through wide publicity, served 'to sensitise policy makers to the use of systematically derived knowledge in the development of policy' (Selby Smith, Hawke, McDonald and Selby Smith, 1998, p. 7).

Some, but not all of these shifts were the result of revelations that the movement was not only two-way, but skewed numerically in a way that challenged the centrality of university as the desirable apex of a qualifications and vocational hierarchy. As the title of the paper asks, 'What does it mean when the backwash (university to TAFE movement) swamps the wave (TAFE to university movement)?' As in the Dwyer case study, the important, real details which progressively emerged and were disseminated posed difficult issues for existing policy and practice. These details included movement against the qualifications hierarchy, the very frequent complete change of field of study, the multiple tertiary backgrounds, concurrent enrolment, the delayed nature of movement, as well as

the unplanned and unanticipated moves to TAFE. The movement also suggested much about the changing nature of the workplace. There was copious evidence of attempts by people to be involved in a wide range of ambiguous transitions, regardless of movement direction, to broaden rather than deepen their vocational options.

The findings from this case study also revealed that 'research implications for decision making based on an investigation of a real world situation in its full complexity can be difficult for policy makers to handle' (Selby Smith, Hawke, McDonald and Selby Smith, 1998, p. 14). They were certainly part of a recognition that the previous single-minded focus on credit transfer from TAFE to university, and the 'success' that resulted, while important to encourage and preserve, was a small part of a rapidly changing and moving student and work population.

In many ways the research, in one reasonably decisive move, had brought a deal of balance into the previously skewed power and policy relations between the sectors. If, as appeared to be the case, people were streaming out of university for TAFE, what did that mean about the value of universities?

But it was not the research *per se* that resulted in the change in movement. It was a change that had already occurred. The research, in a sense, provided a mirror with which to reflect an emerging new reality. The seeds of change had been sown for many post-compulsory students (later to affect policy) during the recession of 1991. In that year, the bottom suddenly dropped out of the employment market for university graduates, and many people with nowhere to work and no access to a university with a post-graduate place, flooded into TAFE. Concurrently, many people already in work lost their jobs or were faced with a sudden and often desperate need to broaden their options. These changes were immediately apparent to some researchers. Sweet (1991, p. 7) noted that:

At present we are witnessing the largest single decline in the youth labour market in the last twenty-five years. Young people are the single victim of the current recession. They have responded by seeking refuge in the education system in unprecedented numbers.

As Sweet (1991, p. 10) pointed out, 'The flip side of declining participation in full time employment has been the sharp growth in full-time education'. What the current author's research focussed on was, like Dwyer's case study, based on empirically derived evidence which challenged assumptions of policy documents against the actual experience of students. However, unlike Dwyer's study, it dragged the debate beyond school leavers in a way which was inclusive of the emerging wave of lifelong learners.

In its simplest and crudest form, the research suggestion that people were finding that more university was no longer the 'be all and end all' vocationally, struck a chord with the daily realities of a wider educated and less educated population in Australia. It had, in the Australian tradition, cut down a fairly tall poppy. It had the effect of moving VET generally, and TAFE in particular, into an apparently better bargaining position with respect to university, in ways which went well beyond inter-sectoral movement and recognition. However, the value and impact of this research, as with many other research projects, cannot be neatly isolated from the many other changes which were concurrently occurring to both sectors, to policy and to working and unemployed people, and which were the subject of much other important research.

3.3 Decision making

Though the first research findings emerged in 1993, dissemination was primarily undertaken between 1994 and 1996. The research is now nationally recognised as ground breaking in both VET and higher education contexts. As outlined above, knowledge of the findings has proliferated into a wide range of publications (through wide citation), policies (particularly associated university to TAFE recognition) and institutional practice, particularly in TAFE. It is of some interest that decision makers invariably point specifically to 'Golding's research' when referring to the university to TAFE phenomenon in Australia. It is important to note that, as with all phenomena, there are a wide range of meanings and interpretations of that movement independent of the perspectives adopted by the author in that research. Independent validation of the research in sites other than Victoria (e.g. NTCC,

1995; Millican, 1995; Werner, 1998) is seen as desirable and necessary for maximum impact on subsequent policy and practice.

4. IMPEDIMENTS TO USING THE RESEARCH

The main impediment to conducting inter-sectoral research of this nature in a State context is, as Werner (1998) confirmed, obtaining access to suitable, reliable, affordable data in large enough numbers to be statistically reliable. A key problem for scaling up a State study (based in Victoria) to a national context is the fact that VET data (and students) come from a wide range of qualitatively different VET sub-sectors in different States. For example, most multi-sectoral institutions are located in Victoria. While these difficulties are perhaps characteristic of bottom up studies, they are an advantage in that the initiative and the research agenda were in effect controlled by the individual researcher, greatly reducing impediments to actually using and disseminating the research.

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A RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR VET IN AUSTRALIA

Geof Hawke and Rod McDonald¹

1. THE CONTEXT

1.1 Background

Educational research and development (R&D) has a long history in Australia. It has been a significant activity of public education authorities and has represented a not insignificant component in dollar terms of the R&D activities of Australia's universities. However, its impact on education policy and practice has been more uncertain.

During the 1980s and in the early years of this decade, education (and particularly, vocational education and training) came under considerable attention as governments at State and federal levels sought to identify the means by which education might contribute to solutions for Australia's stagnating international economic performance. One of the outcomes of this attention was a renewed interest in educational R&D and the role it might play in achieving these national objectives. As a result, a national review of R&D within the area of vocational education and training was conducted in Australia in 1992 (McDonald et al., 1992).

1.2 The research context

This review was conducted at a time of growing focus on national consistency in the structures and processes of vocational education and training. Moreover, that focus had been realised in a number of agreements between governments using a consistent framework. This included an agreement that competency-based training would form the basis of all vocational courses, agreements on nationally consistent processes and criteria for the accreditation of courses, the recognition of providers, and the establishment of a process for developing national, industry-based standards of competence.

Moreover, this level of agreement between State, Territory and Federal Governments was strongly supported and had the active involvement of Australian unions and employer organisations. All member groups in this tripartite alliance saw the process of restructuring of vocational education and training as one which was breaking new ground and required an energetic and innovative approach. A nationally cooperative approach in the sector had, in fact, extended to the point where, during the course of these reviews, initial discussions were commenced between federal, State and Territory ministers which subsequently led to the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). This agency has responsibility for the national coordination of vocational education and training (VET) and, while technically a federal statutory authority, reports through an independent industry-based board to the national council of ministers of VET.

1.3 The organisations

The review was commissioned by the Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee (VEETAC)—a committee established by the national council of Ministers of Vocational Education and Training—because of concern that there was an inadequate 'research and development base to guide the implementation of reforms and the best use of resources' (McDonald et al., 1992, p. i). To develop a national strategy for R&D in VET, VEETAC appointed a Research and Development Working Party which commissioned the research from a group of vocational education researchers at the University of Technology, Sydney. A companion report on research in several Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries was also commissioned (Kearns & Papadopoulos, 1992).

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1.4 Significance

The review occurred at a critical stage of the evolution of Australia's VET sector: a time of increased Commonwealth interest, a time during which all Australian Governments had agreed to work towards a common approach, and a time at which, in retrospect, the ground was laid for the massive changes in VET policy during the later 1990s. Over the decade preceding the review State TAFE systems had tended to run down their research capacity, leaving the only organisations carrying out research as the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and isolated projects in a few universities. It was recognised by some that a strong research effort would be needed to underpin the changes to come.

2. RELEVANT RESEARCH

The review of R&D in VET reported that, whereas 27.9 per cent of all recurrent expenditure on education was for VET, only 14.6 per cent of educational R&D expenditure was for VET. This meant that R&D expenditure represented only 0.22 per cent of total expenditure in VET (see Figure 1 below), whereas educational R&D expenditure as a whole was 0.35 per cent of total expenditure on education.

This report concluded that the current research effort was fragmented and that links between research and policy and practice were weak, with little fundamental and general-issues-based research in VET and no strong critique of VET policies and programs.

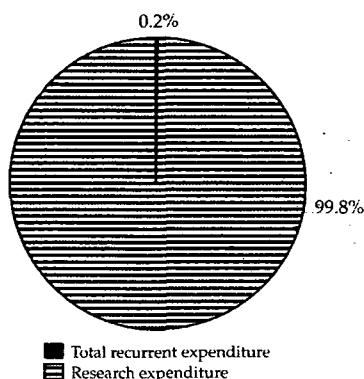
- It proposed the following criteria for setting priorities:
- the potential benefits to vocational education and training, particularly focussing on topics for which there is a major research need and the extent to which the research can form a foundation for further research;
- the ability for the research to be used;
- feasibility of the work in terms of:
 - the gap between what is known and what it is possible to find out;
 - the capacity of available personnel to undertake the work.

In the light of these criteria and the information collected from a search conference, interviews and submissions, the researchers proposed that the majority of government funding of R&D be focussed on the following priority areas for an initial period of three years:

- economic benefits of vocational education and training at macro and micro levels;
- management in the technical and further education systems, particularly the assessment of various approaches to corporate management;
- links between training and productivity, including the interdependence of training, organisational development, business vision and productivity and the place of language, literacy and mathematics in workplace reform and training;
- community perceptions of VET and how these perceptions are formed;
- competencies of teachers in technical and further education (TAFE) and the potential role of practitioners as researchers;
- assumptions underlying and strategies for implementing competency-based training and competency-based assessment; and
- approaches to the dissemination and use of research in VET.

Figure 1: Vocational education and training

Proportion of total expenditure
spent on research



3. DECISION MAKING

The outcomes of this review have been very positive, with essentially all of the suggestions in the report being adopted within two to three years. The reasons for this success will be explored later, but it needs to be said here that there has been a certain serendipity in the outcomes. The review of R&D in VET was undertaken in Australia at a time when funding for all aspects of VET was being reviewed and increased. The case for R&D still needed to be made, of course, and there was still a competition for funds, but the allocation for increased R&D came from increased funds not from re-allocation of existing funds. However, it could fairly be said that those responsible for the allocation of funds were receptive to the findings that the financial support for R&D was inadequate.

The main outcomes were:

- Establishment of a Research Council and priority areas. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) established a Research Advisory Council (ANTARAC) and allocated funds on an increasing scale over the next few years. In December 1993, ANTARAC agreed on five priorities for its R&D program. It held a national conference on these priorities in April 1994 and revised them to the following: needs of small business; needs of special groups; assurance of quality; learning in the workplace; and the economic impact of VET.
- Establishment of National Centres. Four national centres have been created to date, with core funding of \$300,000 each per year: the Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (Monash University and ACER); the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training (University of Technology, Sydney); the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (University of Tasmania); and the Centre for Vocational Education Research (TAFE NSW and University of Melbourne).
- Funding of research. ANTARAC has, in the three years since it was created, made approximately thirty grants.
- Establishment of a number of scholarships to enable practitioners to undertake research as part of a higher degree.
- An international 'first': Australia now is the only country in the world with a national strategy for VET research, backed by a strong system of implementation.

In addition to the above outcomes, the report drove the establishment of research programs in several universities, and was often described as 'required reading' for VET researchers and those developing policy on research.

4. LESSONS

There are, we believe, some general lessons that might be learned from the outcomes of this review.

One is that serious consideration of recommendations is enhanced when education providers are seriously engaged as sponsors of the review, as they were in the review of R&D in VET. Their engagement indicates, as a starting point, a likely belief among senior administrators in the potential value of R&D. These providers are the major potential beneficiaries of enhanced R&D and the major potential sources of funds for any enhanced effort. Where a review is undertaken primarily by the research community (as was a general review of all educational research at about the same time (McGaw et al., 1992)), the key group of providers is likely to be insufficiently engaged to have strong ownership of the recommendations or the outcome.

A second lesson is that adoption of recommendations which are fundamentally dependent on increased funding is more likely where responsibility for considering the recommendations is not diffused over a large number of agencies, but can be undertaken in a single agency with power to respond. In a federal system such as Australia's this can be difficult to achieve unless there is a clearly authorised national agency which can take action. Again, this review was more likely to have a positive result than the general review referred to above, in which there were many agencies involved.

The third lesson might be described as 'the power of a good picture'. In the years following the publication of the report, the pie-chart figure has been used in addresses countless times by a number of people responsible for framing policy, and there have been suggestions that it served as a powerful image for the allocation of increased funds.

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ACE WORKS

Geof Hawke and John McIntyre¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Among a series of studies beginning in the early years of the decade and still continuing, a group of researchers from the School of Adult Education at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) investigated the vocational outcomes for learners attending Adult and Community Education (ACE) courses in NSW. That research, published in 1995 by the NSW Board of Adult and Community Education (BACE) has been used widely and influenced policy at both State and national levels.

1. BACKGROUND

Throughout the early 1990s significant structural changes were occurring to Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system. In particular, governments were deliberately seeking to broaden the range of providers beyond the TAFE colleges which, until that point, had held a virtual monopoly.

While not initially established as a key part of the governmental agenda, one of the emerging categories of provider was the ACE sector. This sector had been recognised by the Commonwealth government as playing a vital role in the full spectrum of educational provision. The 1991 report of a Senate committee *Come in Cinderella* (Senate Standing Committee, 1991) had recognised ACE as an extremely diverse sector with substantially different philosophical and structural histories in the various States and Territories. Thus, by the mid-1990s there was growing interest by State and Commonwealth authorities to explore the role ACE providers were serving in VET and to consider ways in which that could be supported. The creation of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), in particular, raised questions about ACE's role within a national system of VET.

One of the key outcomes of the Senate's 1991 deliberations was their call for 'a more rigorous and analytic approach' to documenting the achievements of the field. This was further emphasised when ANTA's creation and focus on data-based planning systems highlighted the need for more reliable information on the sector and, in particular, its contribution to vocational outcomes.

These pressures led to a series of research activities being initiated by the NSW BACE. In 1992, the NSW BACE commissioned research to examine who was attending ACE in NSW and what were their motives for participation. This report *The Vocational Scope of ACE* (McIntyre, Morris and Tennant, 1993) identified that a significant VET role was being carried out by NSW ACE providers. Subsequently, the study provided input into the deliberations of the national Committee on TAFE and Training Statistics (COTTS) and deliberations on the development of a national statistical data collection for ACE within the VET data framework. The ability of the research to contribute to this statistical framework arose from the necessity to define what constitutes VET in the context of ACE provision. The research identified that significant VET activity was emerging within ACE provision and that patterns in NSW appeared to be similar to those emerging in Victoria. Specifically, the research found that VET provision was focussed within four fields of study—arts and humanities, business, community services and other services fields.

Further, the research identified the population of learners engaged in VET as having very specific characteristics—they were overwhelmingly female, relatively young, held post-school qualifications and were in employment already.

The research findings alerted the Board to a number of key issues which required more detailed examination. In particular, the Board recognised the importance of expanding the base of knowledge about ACE's VET role to explore in-depth issues of both participation and vocational outcomes.

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Accordingly, in 1994 it invited tenders for a substantial project which would investigate these matters. This substantial research project was subsequently carried out for the Board by four researchers from the School of Adult Education at the University of Technology, Sydney. The final report was published as *ACE Works* in 1995 (McIntyre, Foley, Morris and Tennant, 1995).

This research played a significant role in shaping the outcomes of the Senate's recent follow-up to its earlier inquiry into ACE. That report drew substantially on this research in identifying a new identity and role for ACE within VET. Specifically it formed the basis for Australia's submission to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) International Conference on Adult and Community Education and proposed that the Commonwealth seek to integrate VET and ACE policy (Senate Committee, 1997).

2. THE DECISION-MAKING CONTEXT

Two significant groups of decision makers are relevant to this study—the NSW BACE and the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee.

2.1 NSW Board of Adult and Community Education

BACE is a statutory Board within NSW legislation which is charged with the overall strategic co-ordination and management of adult and community education within the State. At the time this study was conducted, the Board was supported by its own staff, who included planners, curriculum developers, researchers, clerical and administrative staff and management.

The Board had, since the early 1990s, taken a strong role in trying to strengthen and expand the role of ACE within the larger education and training environment. In particular it had identified VET as a field in which ACE providers could make significant contributions. The Board saw this as an important strategic initiative and recognised, both, that it needed to understand better the changing context within which it was operating and that if it was to shift public perceptions of its role—especially those held by key decision makers in other educational sectors—it was going to need credible evidence which supported its case.

For all of these reasons, the Board planned a research program which would, over time, build and document the changing nature of ACE and, in particular, its growing role as a provider of VET.

Its first major initiative was to commission research from the UTS Faculty of Education which aimed at documenting what role NSW ACE providers were indeed playing in the emerging VET system. That research project (McIntyre, Morris and Tennant, 1993) focussed attention on the range of courses being provided by BACE which had vocational outcomes and also explored the attitudes toward these courses held by participants. The research also highlighted a range of emerging issues—including accreditation and resourcing—which arose as a consequence of these new roles and responsibilities.

The Board used this research and other information to argue strongly for a share of the 'growth funds' which were to be available from ANTA in 1994. The result was that BACE received over \$2m in additional funding from this source for 1994-95.

The research, however, also highlighted for the Board the complex and wide-ranging issues which the Board would need to address as part of its ongoing management of this new role. In particular, the Board recognised that the status of ACE was still poorly understood within significant sections of the community and that the changing role of ACE had the potential to confuse rather than clarify. It was particularly aware that the Senate Standing Committee had earlier indicated the importance of the ACE sector 'making a case' for its ongoing role. Accordingly, the Board decided to commission further research to provide it with a clearer picture of the vocational outcomes of ACE participation.

This decision was also taken in the context of increasing budgetary constraints being applied across the public sector. There were a number of proposals being floated which would see the Board and the ACE sector in NSW merged with TAFE or other public providers. The Board felt that there were good grounds for maintaining a distinct and significant ACE sector in NSW and nationally, especially as

earlier research had highlighted the particular role ACE providers appeared to play in providing vocational opportunities to women and to the small business sector.

2.2 The Senate Committee

The Senate had, in the early 1990s, taken an interest in the ACE sector as a means of providing an alternative set of educational opportunities to a wide range of Australians who might not be able or willing to seek education through other systems. Its Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training explored this sector's history and role in a significant investigation throughout 1990-91.

The Committee's final report recognised the growing importance of the sector, but also cautioned it that there was a need to better justify its role in a time of increasing public concern over the accountability of public expenditure.

The Senate determined to monitor the sector and review its progress at a later date. Accordingly, the Senate References Committee was asked in 1996 to conduct a further investigation, particularly in the light of the substantial changes which had by then occurred in the VET sector and the growing concern within sections of government about Australia's intellectual capital.

The Senate saw this investigation as providing an opportunity for Australia to rethink its approach to lifelong learning and to consider how the ACE sector in particular could contribute towards that goal. The Committee's considerations would also be important in developing Australia's contribution to a forthcoming UNESCO International Conference.

The Senate Committee carried out its own research as part of its deliberations. These involved a review of structural and policy changes at Commonwealth level in adult education since the 1991 report, changes in the pattern and level of participation, the organisation of ACE provision in the States and Territories and also looked at the changing demographics of Australian society. Other matters examined by the Committee included emerging issues such as the Internet and the professional development of Australia's adult educators.

As well, the Committee held a range of public hearings at which significant individuals and organisations were asked to provide evidence which would assist the Committee in its deliberations.

Given the political context of the Senate at the time—the Government did not hold a majority in that House—the capacity of the Committee's recommendations to directly influence Government policy was less than it might at other times have been. However, the Senate has often served as a generator of ideas which lead to action at later dates.

3. THE RESEARCH

The research carried out by the research team involved a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods. These included:

- A sample survey of ACE participants. Ten thousand written survey forms were distributed to approximately 2,000 classes in forty NSW ACE providers in early September 1994. Overall, the response rate was lower than expected and a total of 3,417 useable responses was obtained. However, demographic comparisons between this 1994 sample and earlier samples strongly suggested that the sample was representative.
- Analysis of DEET data. Data on labour market programs contracted to ACE providers was analysed to look at the nature and magnitude of labour market programs as a component of overall ACE provision.
- A focus group of ACE providers. ACE principals and co-ordinators were involved in a focus group which addressed issues concerning their provision of 'special programs' outside their general or advertised program, including customised training for specific firms.
- Case Studies. A number of different kinds of case studies were conducted, each with different focusses. These included case studies of customised training programs which involved interviews with the providers to identify employer requirements and expectations. A further

series of case studies focussed on regional colleges and small centres. These examined their operating context, the range of provision that they offered and the vocational outcomes which resulted.

- Analysis of provider records. Providers who held detailed records on learners, including information on employers, were used to profile the employment status, occupational background and industry sector of learners.
- Employer surveys. Using both mail surveys and interviews, the views of employers on the role and value of ACE in providing VET were sought. In total, 36 interviews were conducted and 206 mail surveys were returned (a 17% response rate).

The research design was constructed so that the research was able to address issues from multiple perspectives. Specifically, the research findings considered vocational outcomes from the perspectives of the learners, skills that were required, employers and industry, regional, rural and other providers and also looked at ACE provision in the context of government contractual arrangements.

The primary findings of the research included:

- the lack of a defined role for ACE within the VET system. The research highlighted the differing understandings of a vocationally focussed role for the ACE sector. Both employers and providers themselves held a range of views which, at times, took quite different directions. Moreover, employers were not generally aware of ACE, with less than half knowing about ACE or local college courses.
- the value of ACE as a model of lifelong learning for the VET system.
- the limited range of VET provision available within the ACE sector. The fields of study in which occupationally relevant courses were offered was concentrated almost entirely in four areas. Participants also reported that their outcomes were more likely to be in the area of generic skills rather than specific benefits such as career mobility or job security. However, these gains appeared to be substantial with 65 reporting improved performance in at least four areas of work.
- the problematic nature of ACE's resource base. Relatively few employers were taking advantage of ACE providers to deliver customised courses on a fee-for-service basis. This required providers to rely almost totally on public funding and student fees. The potential growth of 'self-funded' general adult education is limited by population size of the college's catchment and the affluence of the area it serves. This is a particularly difficult issue in many smaller and rural areas.
- the limited range of backgrounds of ACE VET participants. For example, 64 per cent of the sample were employed in only twelve occupational categories, which included managers, professionals and clerks. As well, the members of the sample were generally well educated, with over a quarter holding professional-level qualifications. Moreover, 75 per cent of participants were female.
- the lack of collaborative arrangements between ACE and VET providers or systems.

4. THE IMPACT OF THE RESEARCH

The research has moved policy in new directions. The findings on ACE participation cited in the second Senate Report show how the research has challenged the accepted view that ACE has a 'compensatory or second chance role' (Senate Committee, 1997, p. 8). The finding of the relatively advantaged nature of ACE participants has led policy makers to increase their emphasis on equity strategies, and to target groups which are under-represented in post-school education.

The research has helped to position ACE amid the difficulties of training reform. *Vocational Scope* and *ACE Works* helped to persuade government to include ACE in their thinking about the new national system of VET and give the sector access to growth funds. The research has also challenged ideas that the 'vocational' should be narrowly rather than broadly understood.

Finally, the commissioned projects arguably have helped to establish 'research' itself as a basis for strategic policy development as the sector continues to manage a turbulent policy environment. This

relationship between policy and research is the subject of further publications (McIntyre, 1998) and an important focus of a proposed doctoral thesis.

Specifically, the Board has used the research to enhance its formal role within the VET system and has been able to maintain a 'right' of the ACE sector to a share of VET funding within the State. It has also provided the starting point for a number of other explorations of the economic role played by ACE providers and of the economics of the sector more broadly (McIntyre, Brown and Ferrier, 1997).

The report has been cited as leading research on ACE in Australia. The most significant citation is in the recent report of the second Senate Inquiry into Adult and Community Education in Australia, *Beyond Cinderella: Towards a Learning Society* (Senate Committee, 1997), particularly in Chapter 3, 'Participation in and provision of ACE programs' (pp. 35-80).

At the start of this chapter, the Senate report refers to McIntyre as 'a leading researcher in the field' (p. 37). In total, McIntyre's work is referred to in 23 places. These include 16 references to evidence: regarding the relatively advantaged nature of ACE participants (p. 37, 5 places); as summing up the overall picture of participation (transcript quoted, p. 39); regarding the lack of representation of unemployed people in general adult education (ibid); regarding the types of courses taken by men and women in different occupations, exemplifying the 'sharper and more detailed picture of the ACE landscape' emerging from improved research (p. 40); agreement with McIntyre's view, directly quoted, that 'heightened awareness ... of the segmented nature of provision ... has encouraged providers to focus on the disparities in participation by social groups ...' (p. 41); regarding the conclusion that targeting for equity groups remains an issue for the sector (pp. 44-45); regarding the over-representation of professional males (p. 48) and the conclusion that the ACE sector could play a bigger role in 'second chance' education (p. 49); regarding the adoption of a program-driven approach to meeting the needs of different groups (p. 63); and as indicating that future research must examine non-participation of equity groups (p. 65) and the effectiveness of the ACE interface with other sectors (p. 67). The Committee recommends increased funds for ACE research through ANTA.

The Senate Report singles out the *ACE Works* report in seven other places: as key research on participation (p. 37), referred to as 'a major study by BACE' and directly quoted regarding the occupational profile of ACE participants (p. 39); regarding provision for and participation by Aboriginal people (pp. 54-55); regarding case studies of community providers (p. 63) and their ability to compete for contract funding (p. 64); and finally, as an example of 'valuable work ... already undertaken on the TAFE-ACE interface (p. 67). Related work (which was inspired by this research) on a national survey of adult learning (McIntyre and Crombie, 1995) is also cited four times throughout the report (pp. 35, 38, 48 and 49).

ACE Works is also cited in recent nationally funded projects on ACE (e.g. Bennink and Blackwell, 1995; Sharpe and Robertson, 1996; Adult Community and Further Education Board of Victoria, 1993). Both this project and the earlier *Vocational Scope* (McIntyre, Morris and Tennant, 1993) are cited by Schofield's review of ACE VET courses in NSW as examples of effective strategic research by the Board.

5. WHY THE IMPACT OCCURRED

The NSW Board saw this research as a key part of its ongoing strategic development. As such, it was committed from the inception of the research to act on its principal findings. Accordingly, the Board has subsequently sought to address each of the research's key findings and many of the matters of detail identified in the report. On the funding and infrastructure issue, for example, it developed a substantial program of further action-based research which it is using to restructure its financial base and to negotiate its funding arrangements with government.

At the Commonwealth level, the Senate was committed to following up its 1991 investigation and was keen to identify significant research which would help it to understand the current context of ACE and significant changes since 1991. In that context the research provided a timely and significant

input into the Senate's discussions and the research was referred to in some twenty-three instances in the Senate report.

Key factors which appear to have led to the research's substantial influence on both policy and practice are that, in the case of BACE, the research was commissioned by the Board with the clear intention that it would be used to help frame their strategic policy. Moreover, the Board was deeply and intimately involved with the research throughout and negotiated at length with the research team what would be the scope and depth of the research brief. The resultant brief was clear and unambiguous and, at the same time, broad-ranging in its scope.

In the case of the Senate, the timeliness of the research was critical, but this was significantly augmented by the involvement of one of the authors in presenting evidence to the Committee, based upon the research. This was further strengthened when other evidence to the committee cited the research and the NSW Board used the research as the basis for its submission.

A further factor which has operated at national level was the timeliness of the research. Because the Board and the researchers foresaw an emerging range of issues for ACE, the research was conducted and published at a time when policy was still being shaped. As a result, this research was able to shape the responses of policy makers in the Board and elsewhere as a national discussion began. As well, it has provided an important starting point for a wide range of other, often more targeted research, both on a national scale and within other States and Territories.

As well, this research study was one of a series of studies which progressively expanded our knowledge of the changing context of ACE and its increasing involvement within VET. Because it was not a single piece of work its cumulative impact was enhanced and it was seen by the sector as significantly 'adding value' to a body of knowledge which had not existed before.

More generally, the research was widely disseminated and widely read; a key factor underpinning this appears to have been the time and effort expended by the Board in the production of the final report. The published version of the report was extensively edited to ensure its readability and specialist designers restructured the report's presentation to increase its easy readability. The emphasis on use of simple tables and graphs also enhanced its usefulness.

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IMPACT OF NATIONAL REVIEWS OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH POLICY¹

Barry McGaw²

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two national reviews of educational research were conducted in Australia in the period 1991-93. One was a general review of the whole educational research enterprise (McGaw et al., 1992), the other a more specific review of research in vocational education and training (VET) (McDonald et al., 1993). The reviews differed in their sponsorship in ways that ultimately influenced the impact of their recommendations. For the general review, there was a broadly diffused ownership, but finally such diffusion of responsibility for action on the recommendations that little happened. For the more specific review, there was a single sponsoring agency with the policy and financial capacity to respond to the recommendations and it accepted and acted on them.

1. ORIGINS AND SPONSORSHIP OF TWO NATIONAL REVIEWS

The general review was initiated by the Australian Research Council (ARC), an agency of the Federal Government responsible for recommending funding for research in all disciplines, primarily in higher education institutions. The review of educational research was the third in a series of discipline reviews, commencing after physics and earth sciences.

Although the review was but one in a systematic series of reviews of research in a variety of disciplines and fields, its timing and form were influenced by criticisms from within the educational research community. During the 1970s, there had been a Federal Government Education Research and Development Committee that funded educational research. With its abolition, the ARC had become the sole agency through which competitive research grants could be sought. The level of funding available for educational research was reduced, but many in the educational research community, particularly through the Australian Association for Research in Education, argued that the position was worsened by the poor fit of educational research into the disciplinary structure of the committees of the ARC.

The ARC provided some financial support for the discipline reviews, but made it conditional on the provision of additional support from other agencies. The review of educational research had seventeen financial sponsors, including nine professional associations, two national research agencies, four of the eight State and Territory departments of education, a Federal Government agency and the ARC. The ARC convened a planning meeting to form a Reference Group for the review and it appointed a panel to conduct the review. The panel consisted of the head of a national educational research agency, an educational researcher who was a member of an Australian Research Council Review Panel, a researcher in VET and a senior official from a State department of education.

The more specific review of research in VET was commissioned by the Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee (VEETAC). The national council of Ministers of Vocational Education and Training had established this committee because of concern that there was an inadequate 'research and development base to guide the implementation of reforms and the best use of resources' (McDonald et al., 1993, p. i). To develop a national strategy for research in VET, VEETAC appointed a Research and Development Working Party that commissioned assistance from a group of vocational education researchers at the University of Technology, Sydney.

¹ This paper is adapted from the Australian case study prepared for an OECD review of educational research and development policies (McGaw, 1995).

² Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

There were several significant differences in the origins and sponsorship of the two reviews which, in the end, appear to have influenced the impact of their recommendations.

The general review was initially sponsored by an agency with a very limited interest. The ARC funds basic research and, in relation to educational research, its interest lay in assessment of the state of affairs in basic educational research in Australia and, on the side, the specific issue of whether its existing panel structure adequately accommodated education. The fact that the review of educational research came so early in the series conducted by the ARC was due in large measure to agitation from the educational research community. Though the review received some financial support from departments of education, and received submissions from all but one of them, it was predominantly sponsored and conducted by the research community.

The more specific review of research in VET was established and supported by VET authorities. These policy and administrative authorities were concerned to build a better research base for their activities. They engaged the research community in the review process but they declared a serious interest in the outcome of the review from the beginning.

2. CONCLUSIONS OF THE REVIEWS

Both reviews reported on the status of educational research in Australia, one on the overall picture, the other specifically on research in VET.

The general review concluded that the educational research enterprise in Australia had many strengths. Funding for more basic educational research through the competitive program of the ARC had grown to the point where education was third after psychology and economics in funding in the social sciences. Further, 22 of the 50 Australian universities had nominated education as one of their areas of research strength. Alongside these there were, however, continuing issues of serious concern. Education administrators and practitioners generally saw research as irrelevant to their concerns; researchers felt they lacked support from government agencies and the higher education sector and complained of low levels of funding (compared with that for other fields). There was no serious planning for the recruitment and training of new educational researchers.

The educational research enterprise had grown dramatically since the 1960s but that growth had created a lack of cohesion. There were 33 professional education associations in Australia that published research-based journals, 23 of them established in the last three decades. Since education is a broad research field rather than a single discipline it is, to some extent, inevitable that researchers will communicate and meet around more narrowly defined research interests, but the conclusion of the review was that the educational research community in Australia was too fragmented.

The dominant forms of research in education, according to the latest data available to the review from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' surveys of research which are shown in Table 1, were 'applied' (45% of expenditure) and 'experimental development' (30% of expenditure). A quarter could be viewed as 'basic', the category supported by the ARC, and almost all work in this category, as Table 1 shows, was undertaken in higher education institutions.

**Table 1: Expenditure by type of educational R&D:
Australia 1988-89 (\$ million, March 1992)**

Location	Basic Research	Applied Research	Experimental Development	Total
Government				
Federal		0.1	0.5	0.6
State	0.3	5.6	13.6	19.5
Higher education	15.2	26.3	7.2	48.7
Private non-profit	0.1	1.0	0.4	1.5
Total	15.6	33.0	21.7	70.3

Substantive changes in the educational research enterprise were investigated through an analysis of entries in the *Australian Education Index* for 1980 and 1989. This revealed growth in the areas of educational philosophy, policy and development; teaching materials and equipment; and higher education systems and institutions; and decline in the fields of educational psychology and sociology. Submissions to the review also nominated trends in educational research. In substantive terms, increased emphases were nominated in literacy and language education, mathematics and science education, special education, gender issues, teacher education and policy issues. In methodological terms, increased use of paradigms from philosophy, critical theory, feminism and economics and decreased use of paradigms from psychology were reported. Qualitative methods were being used more extensively and quantitative methods were increasingly complex, with more use of multivariate methods.

Almost all financial support for educational research in Australia was being provided by government, since there was little investment by business and little philanthropic contribution. The largest contribution was from the Federal Government, with the bulk of that contribution being through its funding of university staff, a proportion of whose time is committed to research. Total expenditure on educational research in Australia represented 0.35 per cent of total education expenditure. By comparison, 1.40 per cent of health expenditure was allocated to research and the Federal Government subsequently committed itself to increasing that rate to 2.0 per cent of total health expenditure and has more recently pledged further support for medical research.

Most of the research funded by the State Governments was undertaken in State Government agencies, though, since 1988-89, there has been an increasing tendency to commission such work from external agencies. This reduces costs to government authorities in maintaining their own research capacities and can give them access to specialist expertise for speedy, flexible responses to changing circumstances. It also offers the benefits of credibility that independent agencies can provide. For the researchers, there are the benefits of working on projects that are clearly relevant to the needs of education authorities, but there are risks of constraints on the scope of work and rights of publication.

The more specific review of research in VET reported that, whereas 27.9 per cent of all recurrent expenditure on education was for VET, only 14.6 per cent of educational research expenditure was for VET. This meant that research expenditure represented only 0.22 per cent of total expenditure in VET, compared with 0.35 per cent for education as a whole.

The review of research in vocational education, like the general review, concluded that the current research effort was fragmented and that links between research and policy and practice were weak. In addition, it concluded that there was little basic research in VET and no strong research-based critique of VET policies and programs.

3. PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Both reviews suggested priorities for future educational research in Australia. The general review proposed the following criteria for setting priorities for the national research agenda:

- criteria deriving from the application, use and benefits of research:
 - social and economic needs;
 - equity and social justice;
 - the needs of professional practice; and
- criteria deriving from the needs of educational research:
 - the need to preserve and capitalise on existing research strengths;
 - the need to contribute to and capitalise on advances in research;
 - the need to remedy important gaps and weaknesses in research;

and then, in the light of these criteria, nominated the following research priorities for national funding for an initial period of at least three years:

- fundamental research on areas of continuing importance to education and the improvement of professional practice, in particular:
 - the teaching of thinking skills;

- learning in the preschool and adult years;
 - assessment of student learning;
- research on the organisation and management of educational structures, programs and personnel, and the interrelationship between education and the wider society, in particular:
 - leadership and management in devolved education systems;
 - education, training and work;
 - teachers' work; and
- research directed towards the revision and improvement of specific areas of the curriculum, in particular:
 - mathematics education;
 - science education; and
 - language and literacy education.

The specific review of research in VET proposed the following criteria for setting priorities:

- the potential benefits to VET, particularly focussing on topics for which there is a major research need and the extent to which the research can form a foundation for further research;
- the ability for the research to be used;
- feasibility of the work in terms of:
 - the gap between what is known and what it is possible to find out;
 - the capacity of available personnel to undertake the work;

and, in the light of these criteria and information collected from a search conference, interviews and submissions, proposed that the majority of government funding of research be focussed on the following priority areas for an initial period of three years:

- economic benefits of VET at macro and micro levels;
- management in the technical and further education systems, particularly the assessment of various approaches to corporate management;
- links between training and productivity, including the interdependence of training, organisational development, business vision and productivity and the place of language, literacy and mathematics in workplace reform and training;
- community perceptions of VET and how these perceptions are formed;
- competencies of teachers in technical and further education and the potential role of practitioners as researchers;
- assumptions underlying and strategies for implementing competency-based training and competency-based assessment; and
- approaches to the dissemination and use of research in VET.

These priorities for research on VET are more specific than those commended for general education research, but they reflect the policy and program concerns of the VET sector. Both reviews sought ways of strengthening the links between the concerns of policy makers and practitioners and the work of the educational research community. They looked not only to a short term research agenda that addressed current policy concerns, but also to strategies for establishing enduring links that would bring the two communities closer together and make them mutually reinforcing.

4. ORGANISATION AND FUNDING OF RESEARCH

Both reviews also offered recommendations about the organisation and funding of research. Both recommended the development of stronger links between policy makers, practitioners and researchers to maximise chances of research fostering long-term improvements in Australian education. For basic research, both reviews suggested that the major source of funds continue to be the competitive research grant scheme of the Australian Research Council. The general review considered and rejected the proposition that this Council be asked to establish a separate Education Panel for the evaluation of research proposals in the field of education. It did recommend, however, that at least one education representative be a member of the Humanities and Social Sciences Panel. It also recommended that the Council broaden the scope of other competitive schemes from which

grants are counted in establishing the base for the Council's allocation of research infrastructure funds and block funds for small projects.

The general review proposed the establishment of an Education and Training Research Board representing educational researchers, education providers, practitioners and the wider community. For education providers it was claimed that the benefits would be a stronger influence in setting a national research agenda, more comprehensive and powerful studies through pooling of resources, and attention to a wider range of issues. For researchers, it was claimed that a major benefit would be the opportunity to have a more tangible impact on policy and practice.

To fund the proposed Education and Training Research Board's research program, the review drew on the precedent of agricultural research programs and proposed an annual 'industry levy' matched by a Federal Government grant. The agricultural levies were typically 0.5 per cent of the gross value of the agricultural product. For the Education and Training Research Board, the review proposed a levy of 0.175 per cent of total expenditure on education. Matching federal funding would make that 0.35 per cent, the current overall level of educational research funding, which the review proposed should be raised, over a ten year period, to 0.7 per cent. The industry levy was proposed to come from all education providers. In the case of private providers, such as non-government schools, it was suggested that the funds be collected by redirection of a small element of their government grants.

The specific review of research in VET examined a range of structures for coordination of general-issues-based research and client-oriented research, including a single national organisation, several independent centres, a single centre with several branches and consortia of research partnerships. This review recommended that funding for research in VET be increased, over three years, from 0.22 to 0.5 per cent of total expenditure on VET, and then gradually to 1.0 per cent. The review proposed that the Federal Government be the primary source of the increased funds through reallocation of a small component of its contribution to this sector of education.

The general review reported first, but proposed that consideration of its recommendations be delayed until the review of research in VET was completed. The general review's inclusion of training in its proposed research priorities and its recommendation of an Education and Training Research Board, however, were deliberately intended to ensure that a broad view of education and training be taken within the compass of a single national research agenda under the auspices of a single new national organisation. Inevitably, given its terms of reference and its sponsorship, the review of research for VET proposed a research program and a structure specific to VET.

5. OUTCOMES OF THE REVIEWS

The general review reported to a diffuse audience. The ARC, which had been instrumental in the establishment of the review, accepted the few recommendations directed to it. It broadened the category of funding agencies whose competitive grants are counted by the ARC for allocation of block funds to universities for research infrastructure and small projects. It also embraced immediately the negative recommendation that a separate Education Panel not be established within its committee structure. There was also a modest, indirect impact of the review's recommended research priorities through their use to set local agendas. At least one major university used the priorities in a restructuring of its staffing and program.

The other recommendations of the general review have had virtually no impact since the key recommendation of funding for the proposed Education and Training Research Board and its research program through an 'industry levy' was strongly opposed by agencies from whose funds the levy would be drawn. The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, for example, immediately and publicly opposed the idea of any levy for research on education and training being taken from the funds for higher education. The State and Territory education authorities similarly opposed any levy on their funds for a national research effort. The national Ministerial Council endorsed the proposals for a stronger national research agenda and a stronger role for education authorities in setting the agenda, but made no mention of the proposed Education and Training Research Board or of the proposed levy and resolved, in relation to funding, only to recommend that the Federal Minister consolidate a range of existing federal research programs.

By contrast, the recommendations for an increased research program in VET were acted on and increased funding was provided. In this case, there was essentially a single agency to be persuaded, not a plethora of governmental and other education providers, and it was an agency that had declared an interest in the review from the outset by sponsoring it. Although the Federal, State and Territory Governments are all involved in VET, just as they are in schooling, the Federal government has a stronger role. Furthermore, responsibility for oversight of VET had been given to a new Australian National Training Authority for which the funding came from the Federal Government. In response to the recommendations of the review, this Authority established a National Research Advisory Council and allocated \$1.2m for a new competitive research grants scheme in 1994, and \$2m in 1995 with an expectation of further increased allocation in subsequent years.

In December 1993, the National Research Advisory Council agreed on five priorities for its research program. It held a national conference on these priorities in April 1994 and revised them to some extent to the following:

- needs of small business, including, for example:
 - women in small business;
 - managing small business;
 - the extent to which skill demand differs in organisations of different size; and
 - effective training for people in small enterprises;
- needs of special groups, focussing on, for example:
 - in the first instance, Aboriginal people and youth;
 - modes of delivery, especially to Aboriginal people in remote and rural communities; and
 - skill levels of the lowest school achievers and the contexts in which these might be improved;
- assurance of quality, including, for example:
 - evaluating the appropriateness of training in relation to client needs;
 - developing and monitoring standards for teaching or training and learning;
 - developing and monitoring procedures for measuring such standards; and
 - translating quality assurance experience into the VET context;
- the economic impact of VET, including, for example:
 - the economic outcomes of participation in VET with particular reference to labour market and income consequences;
 - the economic costs and benefits of major models of initial VET;
 - the role of VET in national economic development;
 - the role of VET in bringing about changes in the workplace; and
 - market mechanisms and VET; and
- learning in the workplace, including, for example:
 - differences between the workplace and the classroom;
 - teaching skills in the workplace; and
 - workplace assessment.

There are two general lessons that might be learned from the outcomes of the two Australian educational research reviews. One is that serious consideration of recommendations is enhanced when education providers are seriously engaged as sponsors of the review, as they were in the review of research in VET. Their engagement indicates, as a starting point, a likely belief among senior administrators in the potential value of research. These providers are the major potential beneficiaries of enhanced research and the major potential sources of funds for any enhanced effort. If a review is undertaken primarily by the research community, as was the general review, the key education providers are less likely to have any strong ownership of the recommendations or the outcome.

A second lesson is that adoption of recommendations which are fundamentally dependent on increased funding is more likely where responsibility for considering the recommendations is not diffused over a large number of agencies, but can be undertaken in a single agency with power to respond. In a federal system, such as Australia's, this can be difficult to achieve unless there is a clearly authorised national agency which can take action.

The timing of a review can also be crucial. The review of research in VET was undertaken at a time when funding for all aspects of VET was being reviewed and increased. The case for research still needed to be made, of course, and there was still a competition for funds, but the allocation for increased research came from increased funds, not from reallocation of existing funds.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRAINEESHIPS AND THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH

Chris Robinson¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of research and analysis in the process of establishing the Australian Traineeship System (ATS) in 1985 is examined in this case study. The proposal to establish traineeships was the centrepiece of the recommendations made by the Committee of Enquiry into Labour Market Programs to the Federal Government in January 1985, as part of a broader inquiry into Australia's labour market, employment and training programs. This case study shows that research of one kind or another was important in establishing the conceptual case for the Committee's recommendation for new, structured training arrangements (traineeships) that were proposed to complement the existing apprenticeship system. Similarly these arguments contributed to the prompt adoption of the traineeship recommendations by the Federal Government. However, various other barriers meant that the uptake of traineeships was very slow in the early years, with large numbers of traineeships really only materialising since the mid-1990s. Research into traineeships since that time has been limited, and major new research into apprenticeships and traineeships is now overdue.

1. THE CONTEXT

1.1 Background

The unemployment rate increased fourfold during the 1970s in Australia, rising from 1.4% in August 1970 to reach 5.9% by August 1980. This rise continued even more rapidly in the early 1980s so that the unemployment rate reached 9.9% by August 1983.

For this reason the Federal Government established an Inquiry into Labour Market Programs in December 1993 to examine what policy responses might be possible to help alleviate the worrying growth in unemployment. The Inquiry was overseen by a Committee chaired by Peter Kirby. The Committee was comprised of employer, union, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and academic interests. The Inquiry was particularly asked to include consideration of:

- the training needs of the economy, the appropriate roles of government and industry in meeting these needs, and the adequacy of different approaches; and
- the employment, training and retraining needs of the various groups of job-seekers, and in particular the adequacy of existing programs in facilitating the training and entry or re-entry into the labour market of:
 - young people
 - women
 - older workers
 - especially disadvantaged groups such as the long-term unemployed, migrants and the disabled (Kirby, 1985, p. 202).

In addition to the above terms of reference particularly relating to training arrangements, the Committee was also asked by the Federal Government to consider:

- the scope for improved labour market planning and the adequacy of current information and the use made of it in identifying current and future education and training needs;
- the objectives and effectiveness of current labour force programs and their contribution to the training system;

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- the scope for rationalisation and improved integration of programs; and
- the cost-effectiveness of individual programs in achieving their objectives (Kirby, 1985, p. 202).

At the time there was particular concern for the changing fortunes of young people in the Australian labour market. The unemployment rate for teenagers aged 15-19 years rose from 3.2% in August 1970 to 22.6% by August 1983—a sevenfold increase. Persons aged 20-24 years were also facing a deteriorating labour market, with their unemployment rate having risen from 1.6% in August 1970 to 14.7% by August 1983.

Thus, there was a focus on two key issues in the Inquiry concerning young people. First, the deterioration in the labour market prospects of young people. Second, a view that enhanced opportunities in education in general, and in vocational educational training in particular, could play an important role in alleviating their deteriorating labour market situation.

Also critical in the thinking behind the proposal to establish traineeships in Australia was the view that there was need to extend structured training opportunities (combining on-the-job and off-the-job training) beyond the traditional trades training offered by the apprenticeship system.

A key part of the rationale for new forms of structured training was that it was felt that structured training that could extend access to the labour market for young people beyond the traditional trades occupations was overdue and highly desirable. It was also thought that more flexibility was needed to break down the rigidity of the apprenticeship system.

1.2 The organisations

The key 'research organisation' involved in the process of instigating the traineeship concept was the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs itself. The Committee (known as the Kirby Committee, after its chair) set up a process of analysis and research into employment and training arrangements and the impact of labour market programs. This research process is examined in Section 2 of this case study.

The key 'decision-making' organisation was the Federal Government. The Kirby Inquiry was set up by the Federal Government. It was up to the Federal Government to accept or reject its findings and to instigate the process of implementation. This is examined in Section 3. It is important to note that decision making by a large number of other stakeholders was also critical in the implementation of the traineeship proposal. This included State and Territory Governments, both sides of industry (i.e. employers and unions), training providers and, of course, the decisions made by many thousands of trainees and potential trainees.

1.3 The research

The Kirby Committee established an extensive research and analysis process that was intended to provide a diverse and sound basis for its deliberations. This included:

- establishing a significant research capacity within its secretariat to analyse employment and training trends, and to examine existing research and the findings of major reports on relevant employment and training in Australia and overseas;
- commissioning new research on key topics especially for the Inquiry; and
- calling for public submissions, which included analysis of quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Any research contained in the submissions to the Inquiry was funded by the 250 or so government, industry and community organisations or private individuals that provided submissions to the Inquiry. The research carried out by the secretariat or that commissioned especially for the Inquiry was funded by the Federal Government out of the funds provided to conduct the Inquiry.

1.4 Significance

The significance of this case study lies in the notion that the establishment of the traineeship system in Australia was very probably the most significant new development in training arrangements over the past three or four decades, with the exception of establishing the TAFE system itself as a result of the Kangan Report (Kangan, 1975).

The apprenticeship system had changed little in many of its major features from the system that Australia inherited and adopted from Britain during the 1800s. Traineeships greatly increased the opportunities for Australians to participate in structured training. For instance, with the adoption of the ATS in 1985:

- the number of apprentice and trainee commencements increased from just under 50,000 in 1984-85 to over 130,000 in 1997-98; and
- the total number of apprentices and trainees in training as of 30th June each year grew from under 130,000 in 1985 to just under 200,000 by 1998 (NCVER, 1998, p. 3).

2. RELEVANT RESEARCH

2.1 Overview

The Kirby Committee established a very deliberate process to examine and consider research in its deliberations.

A secretariat with some sixteen staff was established in Canberra to assist the Committee with the Inquiry. This included a significant research arm. In addition a research group of four people was also established in Sydney.

The research process embarked upon by the Committee is described in Kirby (1985, p. 1):

Nine research projects into issues of particular concern to the Committee were sponsored ... A large number of previous reports and statistical sources on the economy, the labour market and labour market programs were reviewed ... The consultation phase of the Inquiry lasted for eight months. During that time the Committee received over 6000 pages of written submissions ... The Committee conducted hearings with interested individuals, representatives of employers, trade unions, community organisations, industry training committees, Commonwealth, State and Local Government bodies and a number of people from academic institutions ... The Committee also consulted with a number of people visiting Australia who have studied [and researched] labour market policies and programs in North America and Europe ... During the course of the Inquiry one member of the Committee visited Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore to obtain views on developments of labour market policies in those countries.

In total the Committee:

- received some 250 submissions, many of which included research findings and/or statistical analysis;
- had consultations with some 450 organisations or individuals in Australia and overseas;
- reviewed and considered the findings of some ten previous major government reviews and inquiries;
- considered some 50 other Australian and overseas reports, studies and reviews, in addition to analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data and data supplied by government authorities; and

- commissioned nine new research projects to examine a range of particular issues of importance to its terms of reference, including several projects on aspects of structured training arrangements for young people. These are listed in Appendix 1 at the end of this case study.

2.2 Details of the impact of research on the committee's recommendations

The use of research by the Kirby Committee was both extensive and deliberate. Of the nine studies it commissioned especially for the Inquiry, six were particularly important in framing the proposals to establish a new traineeship system.

The study by O'Donnell (1984) made a very strong case for extending apprenticeship-type training arrangements, combining work and off-the-job training, beyond the traditional trades occupations to other areas of the labour market. This research had a very direct impact on the Committee's thinking about the need for a traineeship system to complement the traditional apprenticeship system. This theme was also picked up in the study by Davis (1984) that the Committee commissioned.

The research projects commissioned by the Committee by Kramer (1984), Morrissey (1984), Power et al. (1984) and Sloan and Hudson (1984) examined various aspects of access and equity to training arrangements by different groups of people. This work fed directly into the notion that part of the rationale for establishing traineeships was to establish structured training arrangements in occupations that would be attractive to people other than Anglo Saxon males (who dominated the apprenticeship system at the time). The work by Sloan and Hudson (1984) on the social composition of apprenticeships was particularly important in this regard.

A visiting US labour economist, Ralph Smith, was also engaged by the Committee to provide advice. His paper 'Are targeted employment and training programs in Australia aimed at the right target?' was quoted in The Kirby Report (p. 6), providing a case to shift away from labour market programs not providing a significant training element. Smith argued that:

The Australian programs are more oriented towards providing immediate employment for members of the target group, rather than increasing their earnings potential (Smith, 1983, p. 15).

In reviewing this work the Kirby Committee concluded:

We have been concerned to note that in recent years the emphasis of Australia's labour market programs has shifted away from training. The major share of expenditure is for private sector wage subsidies and short-term public sector job creation ... We believe that the balance of current expenditure should be changed in favour of an increased share of resources for education and training. The centrepiece of our proposed reforms is the development of a new system of traineeships for young people (Kirby, 1985, p. 6).

A very considerable amount of research and analysis was also undertaken by the secretariat for the Committee (including by the Sydney research group). This included:

- analysis of a vast array of statistical data supplied by the ABS and various education and training authorities about education and training arrangements;
- consideration of extensively researched position papers prepared by the secretariat such as:
 - the paper by Robinson (1984) on the development of a comprehensive labour market policy that proposed drawing together employment, education and training measures into an integrated framework; and
 - the paper by Robinson and Dunn (1984) which examined international experience with employment, education and training programs in many countries, enabling the Committee to systematically consider features of overseas training schemes with potential for application in Australia; and

- as mentioned earlier, examination of a wide range of Australian and overseas reports and research studies. A full listing of the reports and studies examined in the Review are given in Appendix 2 at the end of this case study.

In terms of the development of the traineeships proposal, some of these reports/studies were particularly important. The Kangan Report leading to the establishment of the modern TAFE system in Australia (Kangan, 1975) and the Williams Report on education, training and employment (Williams, 1979) were prominent in establishing the contextual setting within which the Kirby Committee was able to frame its recommendations. The Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission's learning and earning study spelt out the need for more and different kinds of education, training and employment opportunities for young people (CTEC, 1982).

Two Bureau of Labour Market Research (BLMR) studies were also particularly important in the Committee's deliberations about the nature of a possible traineeship system for Australia. First, there was the 1983 study on employment and training programs which examined existing programs, such as the Special Youth Employment and Training Program (SYETP). This study identified the limitations of SYETP and similar labour market programs in not providing sufficient formal training for young people entering the labour market (BLMR, 1983a). Second, there was the study on youth wages, employment and the labour force whose findings fed into the Committee's thinking about the remuneration arrangements that ought to apply to any new traineeships scheme (BLMR, 1983b).

The report on institutional trade training by the Commonwealth-State Apprenticeship Committee (CSAC, 1984) also had a major effect on establishing the nature of traineeships, with its clear position on rejecting the notion that trade training could or should be wholly undertaken within an institution setting. Kirby (1985, pp. 113-114) quoted the report, saying it stated that:

for all sorts of practical reasons, including costs, there is a limitation to what can be achieved through simulated work experience, in either institutions or in-plant training centres with enterprises (CSAC, 1984, p. 5).

Kirby (1985, p. 114) went on to say:

Furthermore, many young people have indicated a clear preference for employment rather than full-time study. An increase in institutional training will therefore affect a large number of young people who are now in lower skilled jobs or who are unemployed.

In forming this view, research by Sturmen of the Australian Council for Educational Research, on the transition from school to work, was quoted in the Kirby Report (p. 61). Sturmen concluded:

Although the work ethic meant slightly different things to different people, its influence was strong. All young people wanted a job badly and work was the activity that students expected to take part in when they left school. One of the main reasons young people put forward for having to have a job was that work provided money to do other things. Nevertheless those in jobs reported that the aspects of their job that were most important to their job satisfaction were special factors and interpersonal relationships. Employers' perceptions of what contributed to job satisfaction were not very different to their own (Sturmen, 1979, pp. 82-83).

In terms of overseas research, two reports that had just been released by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) at the time the Kirby Inquiry was established were important in the Committee's deliberations. Particularly important was the OECD report on education and work and the views of young people themselves (OECD, 1983a). This work confirmed the Committee's own findings in Australia through their consultations that for many young people significant workforce experience was a much more attractive option than continuing in full-time study. Kirby quoted the OECD education and work report (Kirby, 1985, p. 61), noting that it stated that:

Young people are especially critical of the relationship between school and work. They believe that schools are divorced from life and life's occupations, and that they are mostly concerned with the next level of education [post-school education] (OECD, 1983a, p. 24).

The Committee concluded from this that:

The high level of unemployment among young school leavers raises questions about why they choose to leave school early. It is clear that many early school leavers see jobs as very important and highly desirable ... At the same time we believe that most young people want to learn and that education can lead to more desirable jobs. However, many young people consider school curricula irrelevant to the social and occupation skills they will need in later life' (Kirby, 1985, p. 61).

A report on the future of vocational education and training (VET) (OECD, 1983b) looked at developments in VET across OECD countries and helped to put the Australian situation in context.

The release of the British White Paper on Training for Jobs (Department of Employment, 1984) also contained important research and analysis.

This research led to two conclusions that were the Committee's traineeship proposal:

- first, for those young people who wanted to leave school early because of an aversion to continuing in full-time study, work was seen by almost all of them as critically desirable; and
- second, work alone would not adequately prepare them for the workforce and the development of structural and formal off-the-job training options to complement the work experience was critical to this group.

Thus, a combination of on-the-job and off-the-job training was seen as the right approach. Put another way, a training system combining work with education or training was seen as the most appropriate approach for preparing young people for future work if they had a propensity for leaving school early.

Consideration of all of the above work contributed in a very direct way to the Committee's proposal for a new traineeship system for Australia. The proposal is reproduced in Box 1.

THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATION AND ITS PROCESSES

3.1 Overview

The key decision-making organisation was the Federal Government, to whom the Kirby Report was addressed. It was the Federal Government who instigated the Inquiry into Labour Market Programs, and it was the Federal Government's role to consider its findings and determine the key responses to them.

Of course the findings of the Inquiry had profound implications that affected many other organisations and institutions. With respect to the Inquiry's central recommendations to establish a new traineeship system in Australia, those stakeholders with a critical interest included employers, unions, State and Territory Governments and their training authorities, industry training bodies, TAFE institutes and other training providers, and the young people themselves.

It was the Federal Government's responsibility to engage these stakeholders in the implementation of any of the Kirby Inquiry's findings that it decided to implement.

Box 1: Recommendation for a New Traineeship System for Australia by the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs

Recommendation 22. The new traineeship system should have the following basic features:

- i) formal off-the-job education and training completed by work in a related occupation;
- ii) the target group initially should be those aged 16 and 17 who have left school before completing year 12 and there should be equal access for females and males;
- iii) traineeships should be of a minimum of one year's duration with a minimum of 13 weeks off-the-job training covering broad-based skills relating to families of occupations. The on-the-job training should be flexible in content, duration and attendance patterns;
- iv) trainees should be contracted to individual employers or State-regulated group-training schemes;
- v) income support should be provided through privately negotiated wages which take into account the value of the training to the trainee, the trainee's productivity and other relevant factors;
- vi) there should be contracts of training, administered by the State training authorities;
- vii) training arrangements and conditions should be consistent across States and Territories;
- viii) the Commonwealth should lead and co-ordinate the development of the traineeship system;
- ix) TAFE should be the predominant provider of the off-the-job component, but industry and private organisations should be encouraged to participate in this training;
- x) the program should be appropriately accredited and provide avenues to further accredited education, training and employment;
- xi) in 1985 there should be a national conference on the proposal, followed by a White Paper and legislation and pilot programs;
- xii) the target should be at least 75,000 traineeship places by the end of 1988; and
- xiii) an appropriate recruitment incentive in the form of a wage subsidy should be introduced to ensure that especially disadvantaged young people are able to participate in the system.

Source: Kirby, 1985, pp. 119–120

3.2 The nature of the decision-making processes

The Federal Government responded positively to the Kirby Inquiry recommendations. Its response to the proposal to establish a new traineeship system for young school leavers was particularly positively endorsed. A decision was taken in 1985 to establish a new ATS. The government also embraced the Inquiry's proposal to have 75,000 traineeship places available by the end of 1988.

That the conceptual design of the traineeship proposal was based on extensive research was no doubt a factor in the positive endorsement of the proposal. However, even more telling was the level of public concern about rapidly rising levels of youth unemployment and a feeling amongst politicians, key bureaucrats, and industry leaders that the then existing arrangements were not sufficient to adequately address the problem.

The government identified the stakeholders whose co-operation would be necessary to implement the new ATS. These included:

- employers, whose attitudes to making a greater contribution to offering new training opportunities for the young would be critical;
- unions, whose co-operation in amending the myriad of industrial awards would be vital, especially given the propensity to jealously guard the features of the highly supported apprenticeship system;

- State and Territory Governments, whose support was essential, including in the process of amending the even larger number of State awards to enable the establishment of traineeships across many new occupational areas of the labour market; and
- TAFE institutes and other training providers, whose co-operation to establish new formal training components for the traineeships was also critical.

There was widespread support amongst these stakeholders, most particularly at the top leadership levels, for the Kirby Inquiry's traineeship proposal.

The government also established a marketing campaign to promote the new ATS to young people, their parents, employers and the general public.

Quite clearly the implementation of the ATS was an extraordinarily complex undertaking that unavoidably had to involve a large number of institutions and thousands of people.

It should also not be underestimated that the different institutional stakeholders operated under very different organisational cultures that very clearly would and did impact on the way each approached the implementation of traineeships.

3.3 The role of research in the decision to establish traineeships and in the implementation of traineeships

The Federal Government had a historically strong research culture in the employment, education and training area at the time of the Kirby Inquiry, specifically within the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations. The BLMR had been established in the early 1980s. There was, it is fair to say, widespread understanding of labour market and training trends for young people and about a range of research done by the BLMR and others into youth employment, education and training issues. The ABS had also expanded its collection and reporting of relevant statistical information prior to and during that period. As discussed above this work was important in the development and design of the traineeship proposal.

However, I think it is also fair to say that the role of research was much less prominent once the implementation process began. Bureaucratic effort, not unreasonably, shifted away from analysis, research and development of the new concepts, to the business of implementation. In particular, an enormous amount of time was spent on painstaking negotiations across the whole labour market at national and State/Territory levels to introduce traineeships to new areas of the labour market. Enormous effort went into the process of award by award amendments to enable it to happen.

SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS WITH TRAINEESHIPS

4.1 Overview

In this section developments in the ATS are explored from their inception since 1985 to the present time. The particular focus is to consider what the impact of research has been on these developments. Two issues in particular are considered. These are:

- to what extent can any continuing impact over the past fifteen years be discerned from the original research that was used in designing the traineeship concept in the first place; and
- what impact, if any, has research appeared to have had in the subsequent development of traineeships?

4.2 The development of traineeships

The development of the ATS since its introduction in 1985 can be seen clearly from the information in Table 1 (page 44). It took a much longer time than had been hoped for to set up the new arrangements to enable the rollout of traineeships. Furthermore, the uptake by young people in the ATS was also much slower than expected. As can be seen in Table 1, during 1988–89 there were fewer than 14,000

commencements in the ATS. By June 1988 the numbers in training had not reached 10,000. The number in traineeships only reached just over 12,000 by June 1989. This fell massively short of the target of 75,000 traineeship places being available by the end of 1988.

Although fluctuating from year to year, the overall number of traineeship commencements and numbers in training changed very little until very recently. However, since the mid-1990s there has been very significant growth. Traineeship commencements grew very rapidly to reach nearly 55,000 during 1996–97. The numbers in training had almost reached 50,000 by June 1997 (Table 1). Traineeships have contributed to virtually all of the growth in the total number of apprentices and trainees since the mid-1990s.

In contrast, in the five years immediately following the Kirby Inquiry it was the number of apprenticeships that grew very rapidly. The number of apprentices grew from some 130,000 in June 1985 to reach a record high, over 160,000, by June 1990. The numbers fell rapidly to 123,000 by June 1993 and have remained at a remarkably similar level since.

Those changes in apprenticeship numbers can be related to:

- structural changes in the labour market that affected the demand for skilled tradespeople in certain industries and occupations where apprenticeship training has been most popular; and
- changes in the economic cycle that saw strong economic growth in the mid-to-late 1980's turn to a recession by the early 1990s.

It is also quite possible that the prominence given to structured training by the Kirby Inquiry and subsequent government marketing campaigns, combined with the very slow rollout of traineeships in the early years, actually led to a renewed interest in training combining work with study that translated itself into higher demand for apprenticeships in the late 1980s (given the relative unavailability of traineeship places).

The very slow take-up of traineeships until the mid-1990s is most frequently thought to have been caused by the 'demand-side' factors such as:

- wider labour market changes, including the global impact, which has mitigated against youth employment generally;
- an unwillingness by employers to offer traineeship places for these reasons and also other reasons of preferring more experienced and already trained workers in the 'tight' labour markets that have persisted throughout the past two decades; and
- a perception of some kind of 'recalcitrance' on the part of those involved in the industry, legislature and bureaucratic processes required to enable the rollout of traineeships across all occupations in the labour market.

These are all 'demand-side' factors which are thought to have restrained the number of traineeships available to young people.

Although always overlooked, it is possible that the biggest impact has actually been on the 'supply-side'. That is to say that the preferences of young people themselves (and their families) have lain more with some of the alternative options for education, training and work.

Since the beginning of the 1980s there has been an enormous change in employment of young people. Surprisingly though, the overall level of employment of teenagers has been remarkably similar over that period. For instance, around 46% of teenagers were employed in 1983 and some 43% are employed today. What has changed since then is that:

- there has been a collapse of full-time employment for teenagers. In 1983 some two-thirds of that employment was full-time, whereas today only about one-third of it is full-time; and
- most teenagers in part-time employment (i.e. over 80% of them) are also students (see Wooden, 1998, p. 35).

Table 1: The number of apprentices and trainees in contracts of training 1985-1997

Number of commencements and recommencements ('000)				Number in training ('000)			
Year	Apprentice	Trainee ^(a)	Total ^(c)	30 th June	Apprentice	Trainee ^(b)	Total ^(c)
1984-85	49.3	0.0	49.3	1985	128.6	0.0	128.6
1985-86	51.8	1.1	52.9	1986	130.4	1.0	131.4
1986-87	52.1	7.3	59.3	1987	138.9	6.4	145.3
1987-88	55.0	10.5	65.5	1988	147.1	9.2	156.3
1988-89	62.7	13.9	76.5	1989	151.7	12.2	163.9
1989-90	62.3	13.4	75.7	1990	161.0	11.8	172.8
1990-91	45.0	9.6	54.6	1991	151.0	9.2	160.2
1991-92	40.5	9.4	49.9	1992	142.9	9.0	151.9
1992-93	46.1	17.0	63.0	1993	122.7	14.9	137.5
1993-94	50.5	8.9	59.4	1994	123.3	7.8	131.1
1994-95	49.5	13.7	63.6	1995	122.9	12.0	135.8
1995-96	45.0	33.7	79.9	1996	124.4	29.7	158.0
1996-97	44.1	54.4	100.4	1997	123.1	47.8	175.4
1997-98	n/a	n/a	130.9	1998	n/a	n/a	195.5

Notes: (a) Trainee recommencements have been estimated between 1985-86 and 1993-94.

(b) The numbers of trainees have been estimated between 1985 and 1993.

(c) From 1994-95 some contracts of training cannot be identified as apprentices or trainees. These are included in the totals only

Source: NCVER, 1998.

This means that some 280,000 teenagers in Australia have actually found ways of combining work with study—a possibility that was much less prevalent 15 years ago. These trends are documented in Wooden (1998, pp. 29-50). The extent of the growth of this trend must have had an impact on the potential pool of teenagers seeking structured training through traineeships, or apprenticeships for that matter. To put it in context, the 280,000 teenagers combining part-time work with study:

- represent 30% of all teenage students;
- are some 20% of all teenagers; and
- compare with the 77,600 teenagers in structured training provided in apprenticeships or traineeships (see Table 2).

Turning to the issue of opening up traineeships to other groups of people, we can see by reference to Table 2 that the introduction of traineeships has not been able to overcome the male dominance of participation in apprenticeships and traineeships. Sloan and Hudson (1984), in their research for the Inquiry, noted that only 10% of apprentices were female, mostly in hairdressing apprenticeships. By 1997, females were still only 22% of the total number in contracts of training.

Table 2: Characteristics of apprentices and trainees in Australia, 1997

Age group	Number in training ^(a) contracts ('000)			Proportion of total (%)		
	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
15-19 years	60.7	16.9	77.6	44.1	44.7	44.2
20-24 years	58.2	12.8	71.0	42.3	33.9	40.5
25-29 years	9.1	2.9	12.0	6.6	7.7	6.9
30-64 years	9.6	5.2	14.8	7.0	13.7	8.4
Total 15-64	137.6	37.8	175.4	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: (a) number in training on 30th June 1997.

Source: NCVER, 1998.

A more significant change has been the shift in such training arrangements to older people. Sloan and Hudson (1984) reported that in 1983 only 3% of apprentices were aged 25 years and over. As can be seen in Table 2 this grew to over 15% by 1997 in all contracts of training. Despite this growth in the number of people aged 25 years and over, the number of young people aged 15-24 years in apprenticeships or traineeships as a proportion of all young people aged 15-24 years has not fallen (Robinson, 1999).

The introduction of traineeships and changes in apprenticeships has had a significant impact on broadening the availability of structured training in new areas of the labour market. As can be seen in Table 3, combining work and formal training has been introduced in areas where none existed in 1985, such as managerial and administrative training; professional and para-professional occupations; clerical; sales and personal services; plant machine operations and transport; and labourers and related workers.

The relative importance of other areas has declined, such as the metal trades; electrical trades; building and construction trades; and printing trades.

Table 3: Occupational categories of apprentices and trainees in Australia, 1985 and 1997

Occupation	Numbers ('000) (a)		Proportion (%)	
	1985	1997	1985	1997
Managers and administration	0	1.8	0	1.0
Professionals	0	0.2	0	0.1
Para-professionals	0	3.2	0	1.8
Metal trades	44.5	21.4	34.6	12.2
Electrical	18.3	16.8	14.2	9.6
Building	21.9	24.3	17.1	13.8
Printing	3.4	3.2	2.6	1.8
Vehicle trades	6.0	21.2	4.7	12.1
Food	11.0	17.1	8.6	9.8
Horticulture	(b)	3.2	(b)	1.8
Hairdressing	(b)	9.7	(b)	5.5
Clerks	0	13.9	0	7.9
Salesperson and personal services	0	16.8	0	9.6
Plant machine operators and drivers	0	2.2	0	1.3
Drivers labourers and related workers	0	12.9	0	7.4
Miscellaneous/other	23.5	7.5	18.2	4.3
Total	128.6	175.4	100.0	100.0

Notes: (a) Numbers in training contracts on 30th June.

(b) Horticulture and hairdressing were counted in the miscellaneous category in 1995.

Source: NCVER, 1998.

4.3 The impact of research on traineeships over the past fifteen years

The striking thing about the past fifteen years is the paucity of research and evaluation work on traineeships over that period. Apart from the apprenticeship and traineeship statistical publications of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), relatively few studies focussing on traineeships have been carried out. The NCVER's vocational education and training research database only lists some thirty or so studies or reports on traineeships, or that are focussed significantly on traineeships along with other training issues. While this is not an exhaustive coverage, it is reflective of the type of research that has been done on this topic.

A number of the studies which have been undertaken have focussed on micro-level issues, such as the outcomes or impact of traineeships:

- on a particular industry or occupation, such as Northern Territory Construction Training Committee (1998), Reynolds (1997) and Tasmanian Rural Industry Training Council (1993);
- in a particular geographical region or locality, such as Wallace (1993), Brennan (1998) and Smith, E. (1998); and
- in a particular workplace or institutional setting, such as Chapman and Thorn (1989), Velde et al. (1997) and Walker (1997).

A number of other studies have been focussed on traineeships within particular States, such as Smith, Davis and Simmonds (1996), Western Australia Department of Training (1997), Natarajan and Misson (1998) and Smith, L. (1998).

Some of the studies have been pitched at the macro level and have addressed particular themes or issues relevant to the overall development of traineeships. There were very few of those until relatively recently. Sloan (1985) provided a critique of the main findings of the Kirby Report shortly after its release. Ryan (1987) identified some of the implementation problems being encountered a couple of years later. Bush (1992) outlined a growing debate about the ATS that was occurring in the early 1990s.

Given the paucity of earlier work it is surprising that a greater number of studies have emerged since the mid-1990s. Only a few studies focussed on identifying or analysing broad trends in traineeships that might require policy action. These included Sweet (1996), Lamb, Long and Malley (1998) and Marshman (1998). Sweet (1995) and the Centre for Labour Market Research (1997) focussed on some financial issues, such as wage levels for trainees and the impact of financial incentives for employers on the recruitment of trainees.

An area with a considerable amount of recent research concerns new policy developments that have emerged since the change of government in Australia in 1996. The studies have focussed on issues such as User Choice and aspects of the development of New Apprenticeship and traineeship arrangements. These studies include Selby Smith, Selby Smith and Ferrier (1996), Stromback (1996), Watkins (1996), Anderson (1997), Murray (1997), Malley (1998) and Noble et al. (1998).

Of course, there has been much more research where traineeships have been included as part of a broader study of VET or youth issues, such as Robinson and Ball (1998).

Nevertheless, the pattern that has emerged is one of comparatively little research over the fifteen years since the inception of traineeships. This is perhaps best reflected by the fact that a study by Lundberg (1998) reviewing over 100 Australian research studies and reports on entry level training (most of which have been published since 1990) hardly mentions traineeships.

5. CONCLUSION

Recent research by Selby Smith et al. (1998) on the impact of research on VET decision making found that:

The research enterprise is accumulative. Much research does not stand on its own as a piece of work, but adds to that which existed before. This accumulating body of knowledge contributes in decision making to the creation of a climate of opinion and the development of a set of ideas, so that at any given time certain ideas, approaches or ways of thinking are in 'good currency', whilst others are not or are no longer (Selby Smith et al., 1998, p. 21).

Thus Selby Smith et al. (1998) found that much of the research in VET (and in other areas of economic or social policy) does not directly contribute to a new policy, program or approach. Rather it feeds into the 'conventional wisdom' about an issue.

This proposition with respect to the development of traineeships has been explored in this case study. The study has shown that the Kirby Inquiry proposal to establish a new traineeship system is an example of the notion that 'the exception proves the rule'. The Kirby Committee established a deliberate and extensive process to carry out new research and systematically consider a wide range of pre-existing Australian and overseas research. This process fed very directly into some of the key parameters of their traineeship proposal.

I have previously identified four generic categories of policy decisions. First there are pragmatic policy decisions that involve no systematic consultation or research. Secondly, there are policy decisions based on systematic consultation (but often limited to selected or invited participants) with no or very limited use of research. Thirdly, there are policy decisions based on a Green and White paper process that typically encompasses: systemic consultations; open opportunity for submitting written submissions; close ministerial involvement; the circulation of a consultation paper (Green Paper) for public comment; and consideration of that comment in the final decisions by government and the subsequent release of a White Paper. This process involves only the selective use of research. Finally, there are policy decisions based on independent public inquiry, whose features are: an external and expert committee formed to undertake the inquiry; open and wide ranging consultations; the general public being invited to make formal submissions in addition to major stakeholders; a systematic and extensive investigation of the body of relevant research and data; the commissioning of further research especially for the inquiry; relevant minister(s) at 'arms length' from the inquiry process; and independent recommendations being made to government in a public and published report (Robinson, 1998, p. 53).

Policy decisions based on independent public inquiry which makes very extensive use of research are by far the least common. Yet they are also usually the most durable, with their effects often being felt for decades.

From the evidence presented in this case study it is very clear that the Kirby Inquiry proposal in 1985 to establish a new traineeship system in Australia is a significant example of a public inquiry process that drew very heavily on both new and existing research. It is also apparent that most features of their proposal remain intact to this day.

However, there has been relatively little research into the Australian Traineeship System since its inception fifteen years ago. With some of the substantial developments made in recent years a major study of traineeships (and apprenticeships) is now overdue.

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Appendix 1 to 'The development of traineeships and the impact on research'

RESEARCH COMMISSIONED BY THE KIRBY INQUIRY

Research Project

Women, Work and Labour
Market Research

Researcher

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Senior Lecturer in Economics,
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Migrants and Labour Market Programs

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Labour Market Programs and Child Care

Ms. L. Gain,
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Council of Social Service of New South
Wales

Structured Training, Apprenticeships and Skill

- (ii) An Investigation of Skill and the Desirability of Extending Apprenticeship Forms of Training

A Review of the Training and Employment Needs of the Young Unemployed in an Inland Provincial Centre (Wagga Wagga, NSW)

The Social Composition of Apprentices in Australia

Disincentives to Labour Market Training for Adult Social Security Recipients

Survey of 'Personnel and Training Practitioners' Attitudes to Commonwealth Labour Market Programs

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University of New South Wales.

Sample Survey Centre,
University of Sydney.

Appendix 2 to 'The development of traineeships and the impact of research'

REPORTS RELEVANT TO AND REVIEWED BY THE KIRBY INQUIRY

MAJOR GOVERNMENT REVIEWS/INQUIRIES

Report of the Advisory Committee on Commonwealth Employment Service Statistics, Advisory Committee on Commonwealth Employment Service Statistics, Australian Government Publishing Service, Melbourne, 1973.

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A RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION TO USER CHOICE POLICY MAKING

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1. INTRODUCTION

This case study considers the impact of work undertaken by the authors² for the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) as part of User Choice policy development during 1996 and 1997. Five reports were produced for ANTA. They were:³

1. *National Evaluation of the 1996 User Choice Pilot Projects: Stage 1, Interim Report, July 1996.*
2. *Brief to ANTA: Implementation of User Choice following the ANTA Ministerial Council (MINCO) decision of 17 July 1996, August 1996.*
3. *Implementing User Choice: Policy Issues. A Report to ANTA, August 1996.*
4. *Third Party Access and Separation of Roles: A Report to ANTA, March 1997.*
5. *National Evaluation of the 1996 User Choice Pilot Projects: Stage 2, A Report to ANTA, April 1997.*

2. THE CONTEXT

2.1 Background

'User Buys' and 'User Choice'

User Choice grew out of concerns about the progress of training reforms known collectively as the national training reform agenda. In September 1994 MINCO had before it 'proposals for the more effective implementation of training reforms' (ANTA, 1994). A previous report to MINCO had noted that, whilst there was 'broad support' for the training reform agenda, industry in particular had expressed concerns about its complexity. ANTA was asked to address this 'problem', and the Allen Consulting Group (ACG) was engaged to investigate it.

An important element of the training reform agenda has been the development of a training market. Generally, moves to open up the training market have concentrated on the supply side, directed towards making the market more contestable and less monopolistic. These moves include, in some States and Territories, actions to devolve the management responsibility and accountability to individual TAFE institutions, and removal of barriers to market entry for private and industry providers. There have also been some demand side measures; among them the separation of authorities' purchaser and provider roles; and as purchasers, opening a (small) proportion of the publicly funded vocational education and training (VET) budget to competitive tendering. Further, actions have been taken to reform the legal and regulatory framework in which the training market operates; for example, to remove uncertainty about quality and standards. Commenting on the demand side measures ACG (1994) argued that:

they seem to be strongly centralist in their approach, aggregating demand up from the enterprise level ...[This strategy] does little, however, to encourage a more direct and market responsive relationship

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³ All of these reports were authored by Joy Selby Smith, Chris Selby Smith and Fran Ferrier, except the report on Third Party Access and Separation of Roles, which was written by Joy Selby Smith and Chris Selby Smith.

between the provider of training and the purchaser client—enterprise or individuals. (p. 39)

ACG reported that the 'lack of responsiveness, flexibility and relevance' was a 'recurring theme' in their discussions with industry (p. 39).

ACG's advice, not unexpected, was to move towards a market-based or choice system: they labelled their proposal 'User Buys'. Under 'User Buys' (State and Territory) funds would be allocated directly to enterprises or groups of enterprises. This would permit them and their apprentices or trainees jointly to agree to purchase accredited training from any registered provider they considered best able to meet their needs—including (if accredited) the enterprise itself (p. 56).

ANTA accepted ACG's proposal in broad terms but recommended to Ministers, in September 1994, a variation of the 'User Buys' concept known as 'User Choice'. The funds, rather than being paid to employers, would pass directly from the relevant training authority to the provider, upon receiving notification of the employer's choice. ANTA was not keen to move to a voucher system. There were also concerns about the administrative capacity of the training authorities to handle such a change effectively. ANTA decided to promote choice but to limit administrative change.

User Choice was to be confined, at least in the first instance, to apprenticeships and traineeships. These types of training are more homogeneous across the country (than, say, diploma courses) and employers have a more obvious training role.

ANTA also proposed and MINCO accepted that 'a series of "User Choice" pilots in which firms—or Group Training Companies on behalf of firms—choose the provider of the off-the-job training for apprentices and trainees should be undertaken in all States and Territories and across industry sectors ...and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' (ANTA, 1994, p. 32). These pilots were to be undertaken in 1995. However, the States and Territories were slow to initiate the project and the matter came back to MINCO in November 1995. MINCO agreed that ANTA would manage the project jointly with the States and Territories and that the funding would be from national project money. Most pilot projects did not commence until mid-1996. We were awarded the consultancy to evaluate the User Choice pilots in April 1996.

A change in context

In the period between advertising the consultancy and its commencement there was a major change in the political context: the election of the Howard Government. Prior to the election the new government had announced that it would link training more closely with employment. The new government would achieve this goal *inter alia* by:

- '[doing] away with the bureaucratic complexity, duplication and prescriptiveness of the current training reform agenda, replacing it with an industry and enterprise driven training system energised by incentives and a coherent nationally agreed framework; and ...
- focussing on the development of direct relationships between enterprises and individuals on the one hand and training providers on the other' (Liberal Party of Australia, 1996, p. 16).

Significant changes in apprenticeship and traineeship arrangements were foreshadowed.

After the election, at the May 1996 MINCO meeting, Ministers had before them and subsequently endorsed a set of objectives and principles to underpin the proposed 'Modern Australian Apprenticeship and Traineeship System' (MAATS).⁴ MAATS would involve a continuation of the User Choice arrangements already under way (ANTA, 1997).

This major change in context led ANTA to give User Choice a much higher priority and to advance User Choice more speedily. The new government, and Minister Kemp in particular,

⁴ Later referred to as New Apprenticeships.

strongly favoured market models, emphasising an unmediated relationship between the client and provider. ANTA asked that greater emphasis be given in the consultancy to policy issues and concerns associated with User Choice implementation and less to the two-stage evaluation of the existing pilots. Our involvement with User Choice policy development was a consequence of this change in emphasis.

User Choice policy development

ANTA decided to progress the work on User Choice separately from that on MAATS more generally, which was undertaken by an Industry Reference Group chaired by Stella Axarlis, an ANTA Board member.⁵ Thus in July 1996, MINCO took a series of decisions specifically in relation to User Choice. In particular, Ministers:

- 'agreed to progressive implementation of User Choice during 1997 and to full implementation of User Choice for off-the-job training for apprentices and trainees from 1 January 1998'; and
- 'agreed that ANTA after consultation with Industry and State/Territory and Commonwealth Ministers, would provide for MINCO in September 1996 a report setting out:
 - a statement of User Choice policy;
 - details of administrative arrangements required to support the policy; and
 - issues that need to be resolved to achieve full implementation from 1 January 1998'.

The first three reports listed earlier are linked with the development of the statement on User Choice policy and the identification of issues needing to be resolved. Our report provided direct input into the preparation of the *Report to the ANTA Ministerial Council on the Implementation of User Choice* which included a Statement of User Choice Policy, prepared in the ANTA office. The Policy Statement provided a statement of objectives, a definition of User Choice, User Choice principles and the key features of User Choice in operation.

Ministers endorsed the ANTA report at the September 1996 MINCO meeting and agreed that States and Territories would implement User Choice for off-the-job training for apprenticeships and traineeships in accordance with the Policy Statement contained in the report. The meeting also agreed that further work be done on certain outstanding issues. The Industry Reference Group reported to Ministers at this meeting.

Work on the outstanding User Choice issues was undertaken by various groups within the ANTA structure and by outside consultants. We undertook work on the third party access and separation of purchaser-provider roles issues and reported to ANTA in March 1997. ANTA also brought together the work on User Choice with that on other aspects of New Apprenticeships: this integration had been a feature of the policy development process since the September MINCO. The ANTA Board reported on this work to MINCO in May 1997 (ANTA, 1997).

MINCO's May 1997 decisions are given in *The Report of the ANTA Board on the Implementation of New Apprenticeships including User Choice* (ANTA, 1997). The resolutions adopted by the Ministerial Council provide a policy framework for New Apprenticeships arrangements (including User Choice) (ANTA, 1997). 'Within this policy framework, State and Territory Governments will proceed to implement New Apprenticeships arrangements, putting in place legislative changes appropriate to each jurisdiction and reviewing regulatory processes to streamline the system ...' (ANTA, 1997, p. ii).

It is noted that the ANTA Board document agreed by MINCO included a *revised* Statement of User Choice. The revisions principally relate to changes in the administrative arrangements and reflect *inter alia* the strong desire on the part of the States and Territories for a significantly reduced national role in the implementation of User Choice.

⁵ The Industry Reference Group included representation from industry, the ACTU, public and private providers of VET and State Training Authorities.

The Ministerial Resolutions also noted that 'NSW reserved its position on User Choice' (ANTA, 1997, p. v).

2.2 The organisations

Australian National Training Authority (ANTA)⁶

ANTA was established in 1992 following an agreement (known as the ANTA agreement) among Heads of Government to develop a national system of VET in co-operation with State and Territory Governments, the Commonwealth government and industry. The Authority became operational on 1 January 1994.

ANTA is an industry-based Board, supported by offices in Brisbane and Melbourne. It is responsible for the development of, and advice on, national policy, goals and objectives of a national strategic plan and State training profiles for endorsement by MINCO. ANTA is also responsible for the administration of a number of national programs and projects and the Commonwealth funds for VET. In undertaking its functions, ANTA liaises closely with governments, industry bodies and other stakeholders.

The ANTA Board provides advice to MINCO: Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers having responsibility for VET. MINCO is responsible for decisions on strategic policy, national objectives and priorities for the training system. State Training Authorities are accountable to MINCO on matters of national policy and to State Ministers and Parliaments for the operational responsibilities of their agencies.

The researchers

The consultancies were awarded to Joy Selby Smith Pty. Ltd. following open competition. Joy Selby Smith Pty. Ltd. is a private consultancy firm providing analysis and advice on research, innovation and training matters. It is based in Melbourne.

As part of the consultancy bid the company approached Chris Selby Smith and Fran Ferrier of the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training, who have particular and relevant complementary skills (e.g. in pricing and costing and in access and equity matters, respectively). In the event, the team members, while assuming particular responsibilities, were involved co-operatively in all aspects of the consultancies.

2.3 The research and its significance

The research to which reference is made was an integral part of the development of the five reports listed above. This work had a number of features which are noteworthy when considering User Choice policy development in the context of the Impact Project.

First, at the symposium conducted as part of the Impact Project, emphasis was given to the conceptualisation of research as the accumulation of knowledge. User Choice can be represented as such an accumulation. Calls for individuals (students, parents and employers) to be able to exercise their own choices in relation to publicly funded education and training are not new. The more general arguments on the rights and roles of individuals, based in philosophy and political economy, have a long history; the modern literature advocating approaches which place education and training decisions, in particular, directly in the hands of users is usually traced to the early post-1945 period to Friedman and Hayek.⁷

Thus, while this case study looks at the impact of particular pieces of research, in fact it illustrates that:

- the research topic—aspects of User Choice, originating in the decision-making domain—is based on an accumulation of knowledge;

⁶ The material describing the structure and activities of ANTA was provided by the Brisbane office.

⁷ These ideas are traced in Marginson (1993).

- the research itself builds on and contributes to that accumulation; and therefore
- there are 'feed backs' between research and decision making which challenge notions of linearity in the links between research and decision making over time.

Secondly, social science research is a major supplier of information for policy makers. The research under consideration provided 'new' information. For example, it provided information on the attitudes of employers when given the opportunity to exercise choice in relation to their training needs, and on the strength of their support for the User Choice initiative in action. Hitherto this information was unknown. The research also packaged 'old' information in new ways, providing new insights. For example, prior work on the proposed Hilmer reforms and their possible relevance to VET led to the view that the Hilmer methodology had relevance for identifying the 'supply side' issues still needing to be resolved if full implementation of User Choice was to be achieved. Arguably, this brought onto the table a range of issues not previously considered as relevant to User Choice implementation, including third party access, separation of roles and the need to maintain the momentum for structural reform generally. Further, the research provided information (both 'old' and 'new') to new audiences. Even though User Choice had been on the policy agenda for at least two years prior to the commencement of the consultancy, there was a wide-spread lack of common understanding of the objectives and the essential elements that defined the User Choice concept.

Thirdly, the research was commissioned and thus was formally linked to the User Choice policy development process. The commissioning of research is argued to be an important means of bringing together the research system (and researchers) with the policy-making system (and policy makers), increasing the likelihood that the research will be used and have influence: when commissioned the research is perceived to have a use, that is, to serve a purpose. In fact, the act of commissioning the research *ipso facto* may serve its purpose and it may not be used further; or may be used differently; or in unexpected ways; for reasons emanating from within the policy-making system or the research system, or both.

Fourthly, it is not uncommon for ANTA to prescribe the methodology consultants should follow when undertaking commissioned work: usually they give emphasis to consultations with State and Territory training authorities and with industry. Consultations are a feature of the ANTA arrangements when developing policy. Consultations are seen not only as part of the methodology, however. In this case, they also acted as an important linkage between the researchers and the policy makers, thereby contributing to its use and influence. Thus, the opportunity to hold 'technical discussions' with officers in the training authorities on particular matters enhanced the two-way flow of ideas. The presence of more junior and less experienced staff at consultative meetings provided an opportunity to enhance knowledge and understanding on current issues. The contacts made facilitated continuing interchange of developing ideas related to policy issues, although not necessarily confined to the narrowly defined boundaries of the consultancy. These were notable features of the consultations in many instances.

Further, because of the changed political context the first consultancy, in particular, was an evolving consultancy. What began as an evaluation rather removed from mainstream developments in VET became more central to the Howard Government reforms and thus to ANTA. Both parties adjusted, the adjustments being reflected in the focus of the consultancy, its processes and its timing. From the point of view of the researchers, we sought to be sensitive to ANTA's needs as they developed and made continuing efforts to stay in close contact with them.

There is one final point. This is our story; we don't know the full story—and it is likely that nobody does, wholly, however closely involved in policy development, however senior or however central to one aspect of the policy development process, given the many players involved. To the extent that this point applies generally, estimates of research use and impact on decision making are almost always subjective.

3. THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATION AND POLICY MAKING

It has been argued that the study of policy making should concentrate on analysing three areas: the policy process, the distribution of power, and the actors' assumptive worlds (Ham and Hill, 1984). In our view, features in each of these areas can determine the use and influence of research on policy making.

3.1 The policy process

The policy process is characterised by a number of stages and research of different types potentially can play a part in each. Palmer and Short (1994) identify five phases: problem identification and agenda setting; policy formulation; adoption; policy implementation; and program and policy evaluation. In the case of User Choice policy making, the Allen Consulting Group's work is closely related to problem identification and agenda setting and the research under review is linked with the subsequent policy formulation phase.

Nevertheless, it would seem that the research impact was greater at the beginning than at the end of the policy formulation phase. This stage was protracted. As time passed, the ideological and political assumptions underlying User Choice became more apparent and the full implications for adoption became clearer. Some of these implications were not attractive to key stakeholders. The outcome was that the final formulation of the policy (the revised Statement of User Choice policy) differed from its initial conception. In particular, there was a very significantly reduced national role in the implementation of User Choice.

Potentially, research can play an important role in the program and policy evaluation phases also: an evaluation can provide the opportunity for finetuning of the program and for adjustment to changing circumstances. In the case under review the experience was rather different. Whilst the research started out as an evaluation of a pilot program, as indicated earlier, the political context changed: the decision to proceed with the 'full implementation' of User Choice was taken prior to the completion, even of the first stage of the evaluation.

3.2 Distribution of power among key stakeholders

The particular set of institutional arrangements in place to determine policy and the implied distribution of power among them can influence the use and influence of research. In a federal system where responsibility is distributed, governmental decision making is highly involved and interactive. There are many actors and a multiplicity of decisions to act or not to act, determined often in a number of agencies, both at Commonwealth and State and Territory levels. Key stakeholders, including business and union groups, may also have input into the decision-making process. Decision making can become even more involved if the arrangements are still being worked through, are not wholly accepted, or if there are perceptions that they can be revised or upset.

The institutional arrangements underpinning national VET policy making are complex. Even the chairman of the ANTA Board commented publicly about the number of committees and the large number of meetings in the ANTA structure. As noted earlier, there is a wide range of players. The ANTA Ministerial Council includes all State and Territory Ministers with responsibilities for VET and both Senator Vanstone and Dr Kemp represented the Commonwealth Government. The Ministerial Council is advised by the ANTA Board, supported by offices in Brisbane and Melbourne. The Ministers are advised at State and Territory level by their training authorities (and by central agencies as appropriate) and at the Commonwealth level by the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (which saw itself as the primary policy adviser on VET to the Federal Minister). The ANTA Board was chaired by a businessman and had other business people on it. In addition, there were representatives from the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and from a peak industry body (the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry—whose representative was ex officio).

The situation was made more complex by the fact that the distribution of power among these players had been changing. The election of the Howard Government foreshadowed wider changes in the industrial relations framework in Australia and a changing balance between business and unions in the formulation of VET policy and its practical implementation. The government's policy emphasis on small business and regional Australia also stressed different elements in VET.

More fundamentally, VET is a contested area, traditionally TAFE having been a matter for State policy and administration. Recently, there had been increasing Commonwealth involvement, the Commonwealth Government's influence on policy changes being related to funding, industry pressure and labour market requirements; however, this increased involvement had not always been welcomed by States and Territories. The distribution of power among the key stakeholders was being contested during the User Choice policy development process.

Two other sets of players should be noted: shadowy, not always recognised, but very influential when they wish. The first is the central departments and agencies in each State and Territory, such as Premiers' Departments, Cabinet Offices and Treasuries. Sometimes they are in a watching mode, sometimes more active, as in relation to the renegotiation of the ANTA Agreement, wider changes such as competition policy, or consistency with the broad direction of public sector financial and management reforms or Federal-State relations more generally.

The second set of players is Ministerial advisers. Their growing influence on policy development and involvement in negotiations with stakeholders has been a general feature of public administration in Australia in recent years. In this particular case, some key stakeholders indicated they were negotiating directly with Ministerial offices rather than with the ANTA office or State training authorities (of course, they often used multiple channels).

In such a complex and dynamic environment the role of research is ambiguous. A particular body of research may be seen differently by different players as helping or hindering respectively the case they each wish to advance. Further, those interested in bringing about change may look to a particular piece of research but not others to enhance their case, whilst those opposing the change may be less interested, or may use the research selectively or out of context. Indeed, those supporting or initiating the change may propose, fund and oversee the research in order to maximise the opportunities for using it to further their own purposes. Moreover, the research impact can vary over time as the balance of power between participants to a decision (and who use the research differentially) changes.

In the User Choice case, it would seem that those interested in moving to a more demand-driven system, notably ANTA, were more supportive of the type of research being undertaken than those who were lukewarm about the proposed changes. Furthermore, there was a shift in the balance of power, with the power moving substantially towards the States and Territories in the closing stages of the negotiations (in 1997), thus effectively reducing the research's influence although not its use.

There is one other point to be made about the relationship between the distribution of power as an aspect of policy making and the impact of research: it is people that work structures. In VET policy making the influence of key personalities is probably increased by the small size of the participating organisations and the substantial differences between the States and Territories. When there is a willingness and capacity on the part of such people to interact with and learn from research then it is likely that the use of research will be greater and the process of thinking through the issues will be enhanced, even given the structural distribution of power.

3.3 The assumptive worlds of the key actors

The third area of policy making which should be considered is the assumptive worlds of the key actors: the culture of the decision-making organisations and the values and beliefs of key individuals within those organisations.

The ANTA culture can be seen as one which nurtures research into VET issues by a range of (other) individuals and organisations. This has resulted in a considerable increase in VET research. ANTA has made a valuable contribution to expanding understanding of the VET system in Australia.

At the same time, these developments can be seen as consistent with the approach followed by the Commonwealth Government in a range of policy areas, traditionally dominated by State and Territory administration, where the Commonwealth is seeking to expand its role and influence. The Commonwealth's role in VET has been growing; and research funding and research activities can be seen as one means of expanding its influence.

Of course, the support for outside research does not necessarily imply that research is widely used in internal decision-making processes.

It is noted that ANTA has tended to fund others to undertake research on VET rather than to undertake research itself and it would not be unexpected if the outsourcing of research were to expand (relatively) following the recent substantial cuts to ANTA staffing. Whilst understandable, such a move could create a situation where ANTA's own capacity to undertake and use research in policy development is undermined. The conception of what is important to be done, how best to do it, and how to integrate research outcomes into ongoing policy development, including the continuous process of discussion and negotiation with key stakeholders cannot, in the last resort, be outsourced. It is a core function of the organisation, so long as it seeks more than merely a reactive, administrative role.

Decision making within the ANTA Agreement structure involves more than the ANTA secretariat alone, of course. State and Territory training authorities are key players. While information has long been collected by State and Territory training authorities and some research is conducted by them, arguably it has tended to be short-term and focussed on immediate administrative needs. Longer term research, especially that conducted by independent researchers and intended for or having value in strategic policy development or public discussion, perhaps incorporating a critical approach to current practices, generally has a lower priority in most State and Territory training authorities.

It should not be overlooked that individual enterprises and training providers can also be interested in information generated by research. Generally, their interest is pragmatic: they want feedback related to their own particular concerns. It is of interest to note that these stakeholders were interested in the User Choice work, especially in the results of the pilot project evaluations.

There is one final point. The literature suggests that research information can change the beliefs or policy assumptions of decision makers (assuming they are open to new information), but only over time. This implies that changes in beliefs are less likely to derive from a single research study than from an accumulation of research findings. Any impact of the User Choice consultancy is seen as being built on previous work, including the ACG's work and the Hilmer Report. In turn, the ACG report drew on ideas which had been debated on and off over many years. This process of accumulation enhances impact. In turn, the impact may be spread over a lengthy period and be difficult to identify.

4. THE RESEARCH: ITS USE AND INFLUENCE

As indicated above, the research under consideration addressed three matters related to User Choice policy development during 1996 and 1997:

- the identification of the policy issues and concerns associated with the implementation of User Choice;
- more detailed investigation of two of those policy issues—third party access and separation of roles; and
- the national evaluation of the 1996 User Choice pilot projects.

In this section the use (i.e. the purpose served) and the influence (whether the research made a difference in decision making) of the User Choice research are considered. Primarily, the research is linked with policy and planning.

4.1 Identification of policy issues and concerns

User Choice is an initiative intended to strengthen the demand side of the training market. In our report we identified a number of demand side issues as important for the effective and sustainable implementation of User Choice. These issues included: determining who the users (or clients) of the training system are to be—employers, employees or both; action to be taken if an employer does not provide a good training environment; the distribution of the benefits and costs of training among employers, employees and governments; the training needs of small business; VET in schools; and access and equity issues.

The view was also taken that the purpose of User Choice would be circumscribed if significant monopoly elements remained on the supply side of the training market. The Hilmer methodology was used to provide a framework for identifying possible sources of monopoly power in the training market. This approach brought onto the table a range of issues not previously considered in relation to User Choice implementation; for example, the need to maintain the momentum of structural reform, costing and pricing, and third party access.

The reports argued too that there was a need for agreement among interested parties as to the parameters of User Choice. It was argued that a common focus was required in relation to: an understanding of the User Choice concept including its objectives; a commitment to a strong public training system; accepting that commitment, the importance of maintaining and enhancing the overall VET system; and whether the training market is national in scope, or limited by State and Territory boundaries.

As indicated above, the two reports on these matters were used as direct input into the preparation in the ANTA office of the *Report to the ANTA Ministerial Council on the Implementation of User Choice* (which included a Statement of User Choice Policy), which Ministers endorsed at the September 1996 MINCO meeting. In that context the research was used for four main purposes.

First, the research consultancy provided a clarification of User Choice objectives. In our consultations with State and Territory training authorities it was clear that they did not have a clear understanding of the purposes of User Choice. The objectives of User Choice appeared to have been lost sight of by many decision makers in the period since the presentation of the ACG report. In part, this was due to the substantial turnover in staff and the consequent loss of corporate memory in a number of agencies.

Secondly, the consultancy defined more precisely the key elements of the User Choice concept. There was no common agreed definition of User Choice and different parties had a very different understanding of what the concept meant.

Thirdly, the research consultancy identified the key issues to be resolved if User Choice was to be implemented on an effective and sustainable basis. These embraced a wider range of factors than had been perceived by national, State and Territory policy makers at the outset of the consultancy.

Fourthly, the research was used by the researchers in speeches and other presentations and in consultations with other researchers working on aspects of VET policy, including access and equity. The research results were also published as a working paper by Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (Selby Smith, et al., 1996).

It is argued that the reports were not only used; they also had influence.

First, the influence of the reports can be traced in the improved and more consistent understanding of the User Choice concept and of the issues that needed to be addressed if User Choice was to be effectively implemented. The consultation process was an important means of

spreading this influence even before the reports were finalised among the States and Territories and perhaps even within the ANTA office.

Secondly, 'our words' appear in Ministerial speeches and in documentation distributed by ANTA and some training authorities to the wider VET community which, arguably, also enhanced the common understanding of the User Choice concept.

Thirdly, presentations by the researchers might also have had some influence, but such influence, if it does occur, is likely to be diffused and is difficult to assess.

As to any influence on the national VET system, that is more problematic. Most training authorities were at best lukewarm about User Choice, and NSW had reserved its overall position. Furthermore, ANTA's role in User Choice implementation had been severely limited. MINCO decided in May 1997 that the State and Territory Governments would be responsible for implementation of the New Apprenticeships and that ANTA would have a lesser role than envisaged earlier. This outcome was the decided preference of the States and Territories and reflected developing Commonwealth-State/Territory tensions.

4.2 Third party access and separation of roles report

Third party access and separation of roles were among a number of issues that Ministers at the September 1996 MINCO meeting asked a User Choice Taskforce⁸ to investigate further, with the request that they report back to MINCO at its May 1997 meeting. We undertook work on these two matters, which involved *inter alia* a round of consultations during February and March 1997.

The ANTA Board's deliberations and MINCO's decisions on these matters are contained in the *Report of the ANTA Board on the Implementation of New Apprenticeships (including User Choice)* (ANTA, 1997). In relation to third party access, Ministers agreed that it is a desirable element and noted that it will be pursued in the context of State and Territory approaches to implementing competition policy. In relation to separation of roles, Ministers, noting the opposition of NSW, WA and the ACT to the resolution, agreed, in principle, that the separation of roles between purchaser and provider is desirable under User Choice and that this issue will be pursued at the State and Territory level.

The report of the ANTA Board's deliberations and the way the MINCO decisions were formulated would suggest that our report was not used in the ANTA draftings for the above report. This is even though we received, on an informal basis, a number of complimentary comments about the analysis and content of the report, including from Taskforce representatives.

In our own view, this lack of use and influence in the User Choice policy development context reflected a range of factors. Above all, ANTA made the judgment that these matters should not be pressed to finality at that time: the priority was to reach agreement on 'new apprenticeships'; and third party access in particular raised issues that might jeopardise agreement.⁹

As background to this decision by ANTA:

- positions had developed on these issues in the minds of powerful players quite separate from our consultancy and the time scale we had been given by ANTA and the User Choice Taskforce;
- the issues under consideration were 'whole of government' matters and the key impetus did not lie with the training authorities in individual States and Territories; and
- the overall context had altered in that: developments in Commonwealth—State/Territory relationships had restricted ANTA's leadership role; it would seem that States and Territories were less enthusiastic about the introduction of User Choice from January 1998 (at least on ANTA's terms); and the pressure of other tasks associated with training reforms implied a lower priority for third party access and separation of roles issues.

⁸ Comprising Commonwealth, State and Territory Training Authority officials, chaired by ANTA.

⁹ However, some believe that the issue is a 'sleeper'; and that it is too early to be sure about the report's eventual impact.

However, the consultancy report and the associated consultation process did have some effect in raising the profile of these issues, even if they had not previously been close to the hearts of training authorities. Separation of roles is one of the eighteen issues listed in the ANTA Strategy agreed by Ministers in May 1997. We understand that ANTA drew on the consultancy report in developing that part of the strategy document put to MINCO. We also know that further work on this matter has been set in hand by individual States and Territories. These developments confirm our view that policy making can be a long-term process and that the influence of research studies can be cumulative. They can contribute: to raising the awareness of the issue; to bringing the idea onto the public policy agenda; and to their achievement of the status of 'ideas in good currency'.¹⁰

4.3 National evaluation of the 1996 User Choice Pilot Projects reports

As indicated earlier, the evaluation was undertaken in two stages: the first examined the progress of the pilots at the initiation phase and was undertaken in mid-1996; the second stage was undertaken when the pilots were completed (early in 1997). Reports were submitted to ANTA at each stage.

Overall, the evaluation was smaller in scope and was finalised later than had been envisaged originally. This reduction in scope reflected ANTA's altered requirements in response to changing MINCO priorities and timetables. Thus, the first report included only the results of a survey of users (employers) involved in the pilot projects, without any case studies as planned. The second report was more extensive, based on information gained primarily from a second survey of the users associated with the pilots and detailed study of the ten selected pilots, supplemented by visits to a number of other pilot projects and widespread consultation. The second report included: key findings concerning the User Choice concept in operation; findings about the operation of User Choice at the local, project level in relation to: outcomes, aspects of the training process, and the ease or difficulty in negotiating and administering training (compared to previous training arrangements, if any); and other findings relevant to the operation of User Choice at the local level.

It is not clear if or how the report of the first stage of the evaluation was used. Of course, the report had no influence on the decision to implement User Choice, as this decision had already been made by Ministers and announced (in the context of MAATS). There was a shift in officials' perceptions on the relevance of User Choice in action in the period after the release of the first report. Prior to the evaluation some officials doubted that employers would exercise choice when presented with the opportunity; and ANTA's own evaluation brief had described choice somewhat narrowly, akin to greater customisation. The survey confirmed that employers wanted more choice; would exercise choice when it became available; and, above all, wanted choice of provider (customisation would come later). In the period following the completion of the survey report there was a diminution of the earlier, narrow conception of User Choice; and choice of provider, in particular, became part of the accepted perspective. Arguably, the report had an influence on this changed perspective.

In relation to the second stage evaluation report, it would appear that informal feedback has been 'extremely positive'. However, the policy development phase nationally had largely been completed by the time this report was submitted; thus the evaluation report would not have had an influence on national policy making.

There has been some interest in the evaluation at the State and Territory level, although the level of interest varied significantly from State to State, not least according to the level of interest and support for User Choice overall. One State asked us to undertake further work to assist them to run individual projects better and spread them more widely; informal briefings were provided to two others; but another State did not even respond (yea or nay) to our offer to provide an informal debriefing on progress of the pilots in their State. Some project co-ordinators have also sought informal feedback on their individual pilots.

¹⁰ The third party access and separation of roles report has been published as a Working Paper by CEET.

Thus the evaluation report was used by some decision makers; as to influence, that is more problematic. It may be too early to tell, given that User Choice was yet to be implemented in any significant way in those States and Territories that had 'signed up'.¹¹

5. FACTORS AFFECTING THE USE AND INFLUENCE OF THE RESEARCH

In this section those factors which contributed to or limited the use and influence of research on User Choice policy making are considered. At the Melbourne case study workshop, the comment was made that, generally, researchers should have 'suitably modest' expectations about research's contribution to policy making. Research is only one of a number of sources of information available to decision makers and information from all sources is only one of many inputs into the decision-making process: 'on a good day, ideas (information) may gain a hearing amid the swirl of political considerations, but it must be a very good and rare day indeed when policy makers take their cues mainly from scientific knowledge about the state of the world they hope to change or protect' (Brown, 1991). In our view, these admonitory words should be taken into consideration when weighing up, realistically, the factors which bear on 'use' and 'influence' of research.

As indicated in the previous section, the three sets of User Choice reports have had very different patterns of use and influence to date. These different patterns have value in that they assist in the identification of the salient factors influencing research impact.

Four main factors contributed to the use of the policy issues reports and their having an influence. First, the reports were commissioned: in place was a strong linkage between the research and policy-making settings. When commissioned, the research was intended to serve a purpose; commissioning also meant that a specific audience was identified for the research results. Targeting of the most appropriate audience, even within a small agency, can present difficulties for independent researchers.

Of course, that research is commissioned *ipso facto* is not sufficient to guarantee that the research results will be taken up when completed, as the story of the other reports illustrates. Indeed, commissioning may not even be a necessary condition to ensure use *ex post facto*. Independent research can be picked up and used, especially in agencies where there is a research culture or where there are individuals who regularly monitor the journals. However, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that such a culture or such individuals are common in VET policy-making agencies.

The second factor contributing to the use and influence of the policy issues reports was the marked change in the political and policy development climate. User Choice was less central to ANTA's concerns when the consultancy was first advertised, although there was the intention to expand the pilot project in 1997 given the 1996 experience. Now it became significantly more central, with a much tighter timetable, when the new government set in hand processes to reform the apprenticeship and traineeship system incorporating User Choice approaches. Yet the concept had been defined only in the most general terms; it had no 'flesh and bones'. Effectively, it was a new policy area. There was no significant body of fact or opinion existing which needed to be contradicted or overturned. Rather, the concept required definition and clarification; there was a need for a policy framework and a list of issues to provide some policy substance. There was, comparatively, a policy 'vacuum' and the reports helped to fill it in the apparent absence of other work.

Thirdly, the willingness of the researchers to adjust the consultancy's focus, structure and timelines meant that their work remained timely and relevant to ANTA's changing needs (ANTA was working to a revised MINCO timetable). The researchers responded to these requirements and proposed adjustments and variations in the light of them. If the consultancy had been

¹¹ The second-stage evaluation report has been distributed by ANTA.

conducted according to the original timetable, and if an 'innovative' response to yet another contraction in the timeframe had not been proposed, the reports would have been 'too late'.

Finally, in relation to the policy issues reports, the researchers provided feedback about the progress of the consultancy and the consultations (which were part of the process) through maintaining regular contact with the policy-maker clients. This feedback was seen to be important in a situation which lacked a settled framework, where there was a contest of ideas and an urgent need for Ministerial resolution.

More generally, the on-going relationships which developed with a range of stakeholders during the course of the consultancies were valuable for their effective and speedy conduct. They also appeared to be valued by (at least) some of the stakeholders, to have some influence on their thinking, and on the policy development process and implementation of User Choice in their jurisdiction or area of concern (as indicated by requests for special briefings from time to time, telephone queries on specific points, and additional work).

There is a range of factors which have acted to limit use and influence, at least up to the date of writing.

With respect to the third party access and separation of roles report they are specific issues. The report was seen as being contentious and judged as not worth pursuing if it jeopardised the achievement of wider objectives, or could be pursued in other ways.

By the time the report was forwarded to ANTA the balance of power between ANTA and the States and Territories was shifting significantly in favour of the latter. The User Choice Taskforce (of middle-ranking training authority officials), which officially sponsored the consultancy, had been relieved of its responsibilities by the Chief Executive Officers; the report contained material which some stakeholders saw as contentious; and it is understood that the report was not widely distributed.

In relation to the evaluation reports there was a matter of timeliness. The incoming Howard government had proposed a revision of the apprenticeship and traineeship system incorporating User Choice and the decision was already made at the MINCO level, even before most of the User Choice pilots were under way. Subsequently, when the evaluation was complete, policy makers, who generally are much less interested in the details in any case, had moved on to other issues.

Further, the statistical representativeness of the pilots had been raised, the implication being that since they were not a statistically valid sample, their evaluation did not provide a good basis for policy or practice. This could be a useful 'out' for those opposed to the User Choice concept. The fifty-four pilot projects which ANTA agreed to fund on the basis of recommendations from State and Territory training authorities certainly are not statistically representative. Nevertheless, taken together, the pilot projects illustrate the great diversity of training arrangements in which users and providers participate and they have allowed insights into aspects of the User Choice concept and its effective implementation: the pilot projects provide 'rich' data and a 'good story'.

There is one other more general point which can be seen to have contributed to or limited use and influence, variously, depending upon the circumstances: there are interactions between VET policy processes and the broader policy approaches and stances of each of the parties to the ANTA Agreement. User Choice is a market-based reform and such approaches command very different levels of political and bureaucratic support in different jurisdictions. A State or Territory may decide to support administrative rather than market reforms; to go slow on micro-economic reform rather than pursue reform actively; or to take different approaches to public sector financial and management arrangements. The values and preferences of those involved in the decision-making processes of the different jurisdictions have influence on which research is used or not used.

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THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH ON THE VISION

Susannah Tidemann¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines the important role and multiple impacts that research had on the development of the State Training Board's strategic plan, *A Vision for TAFE in Victoria* (State Training Board, 1998a). It shows that whilst research did not alone shape the Vision, altogether many forms of research did influence decision making over a period of time. In this case study it is shown that publications and existing research set the stage for the qualitative phases of the project, and the final results: *A Vision for Training and Further Education in Victoria - Vision Statement* (State Training Board, 1998a) and *Taking Adult Community Education to the Year 2000* (ACFEB, 1998).

1. INTRODUCTION

This case study considers the role of research in the approach taken by the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE) to develop the State Training Board Vision.

To develop the Vision, OTFE undertook various forms of research, integrated with, and in some cases, located within a scenario-planning process. The Vision has received significant praise within Australia and attracted interest internationally. By evaluating the influence of the research undertaken on the Vision we will consider the relationship between research and policy in the areas of publications, commissioned research reports, seminars and workshops.

2. THE CONTEXT

2.1 Background

The previous State Training Board strategic plan, *Strategic Directions in Vocational Education and Training*, was adopted in 1994. A year later, the Adult, Community and Further Education Board (ACFEB) adopted the *Adult, Community and Further Education State Plan 1996-1998* (ACFEB, 1995). One of the key aims of the recent planning process was to integrate research and strategic outcomes for both sectors by developing new Visions at the same time. Other more important motivations for developing the Vision were that many of the goals set out in these plans had been achieved and that some were outdated by the changes in the sector.

As a result OTFE began a strategic review in June 1997, incorporating a three-stage process of environmental analysis, scenario planning and development of strategies for the future.

2.2 The organisations

The Office of Training and Further Education is a division of the Victorian Department of Education, and is responsible to the Minister for Tertiary Education and Training, the State Training Board, the Adult, Community and Further Education Board of Victoria and the Secretary to the Department. OTFE is responsible for implementing any policy or decision made by the Minister, State Training Board or Adult, Community and Further Education Board, and for purchasing training from technical and further education (TAFE) institutes, private providers and community-based providers. The primary functions of OTFE are discussed in Section 6 below.

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2.3 The research context

The scenario-planning approach was proposed as a planning method because experience led to the conviction that conventional planning methods would not be appropriate for the training and further education environment. Scenario planning offered flexibility in planning, which is important due to constant change in the vocational education and training (VET) sector and the broader environment in which it operates.

The structure of Australian industry and business is changing in response to global pressures and the impact of new technologies. There have also been significant changes to the way people work, such that people can expect to have a number of career changes throughout their working life. Governments are also reviewing and developing industry support policies. Many of the fundamental values of the sector are being challenged by changes in society and the economy, and by emerging communications technology. In education and training there is a stronger push to promote market competition and to empower our clients through a range of user choice options. New ways of learning and teaching that take advantage of developments in information and communication technology are also emerging. These new issues and tensions needed to be addressed in planning for the State training service.

The scenario-planning methodology was originally developed by Shell and later refined by the Global Business Network. Scenarios describe possible and plausible futures, and are used by organisations to assist in decision making and planning in the face of future uncertainty. The argument for scenario planning is that an uncertain future, constant change in industry and institutional realities mean that a flexible planning approach based on systematic thinking about the future is necessary. Political and other considerations make a pure 'market' or unplanned approach a high-risk strategy. The challenge is to avoid a too rigid commitment to one view of the future, but to still enable decisions to be taken.

The scenarios are intended to enable OTFE to anticipate as far as possible where developments in curriculum, professional skills, resources, organisation and systems are required; and have ideas on what form these developments should take. They provided a vehicle to discuss the future more systematically, and helped staff within OTFE to better live with the uncertainty and better resolve the problems OTFE faces.

2.4 Methodology

In June 1997 OTFE commenced a three-stage process for reviewing the strategic plans of the Adult, Community and Further Education, and State Training Boards.

The process involved:

- scanning the internal and external environment to identify major change factors and themes - an *Environmental Analysis*;
- preparation of alternative views of the future using different pictures of the future (scenarios), to provide a background for the Board and OTFE to develop a Vision and strategies - *Scenario Planning*; and
- development of *Strategies* for the future, presented in *A Vision for Training and Further Education in Victoria - Vision Statement* (State Training Board, 1998a) and *Taking ACE to the Year 2000* (ACFEB, 1998).

3. ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS (RESEARCH)

As a first step in the development of the strategic directions, an analysis was undertaken, focussing on the environment in which the training and further education service finds itself. A key objective of the environmental analysis was to provide information on significant drivers of change to assist in the development of future scenarios. This included the following:

- Interviews with internal Managers;

- Desktop research: literature review; analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), OTFE and other relevant statistical data;
- Development of an internal paper on the drivers of VET;
- Five workshops with OTFE staff;
- Five external consultations with stakeholders;
- External workshop with stakeholders; and
- Commissioned research: for example, VET Policy and Research: Emerging Issues and Changing Relationships; CBT in Victoria; Enterprise Training: The Factors that Affect Demand; Enterprise Training: Final Report; and The Role of Training in Overcoming Skill Shortages.

The purpose of the environmental analysis was to identify the important drivers of change which may affect the future. This aimed to inform and to stimulate thinking.

The analysis incorporated ideas drawn from published statistics, international and national reports, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the European Union, the United States of America and research commissioned by OTFE (see above). The Strategic Planning and Research Division commissioned this research to synthesise the body of recent research either commissioned by OTFE or identified as relevant and influential. In doing so it incorporated themes and emerging understandings from the broader body of research literature. It identified implications for policy development and provided a stimulus and frame for readers to reflect on their knowledge of the emerging context of training and further education and the effect of policy.

All of this information was condensed into a focus on the internal and external environment at the micro and macro levels. The micro forces considered the critical factors in the local environment that may influence success and shape outputs. The macro forces concern the social, economic, political, technological and environmental factors.

Externally, the environmental analysis concerned the policy context of education and training, including the demands for training, and the diminishing amount of recurrent resources available to providers. The implications of Victoria's population growth slowing down, coupled with an ageing population, were also identified as key factors which will impact on the demand for training and further education. Other external drivers of change were the widening gap between high and low-income households, school retention rates, and the changing labour force.

Internally, the environmental analysis considered issues of the sector, which are often policy driven. An example of this is the introduction of competency-based training, and how it has influenced the training environment. Competency-based training focusses on the competencies, specific and generic, required by an individual in the execution of their job rather than on the learning process. Whilst generally seen as providing a basis for useful reform, this initiative has raised questions as to the adaptability of workers, the transferability of skills and the balance of benefits of such training as between the enterprise, individuals and society more generally.

4. SCENARIO PLANNING (RESEARCH)

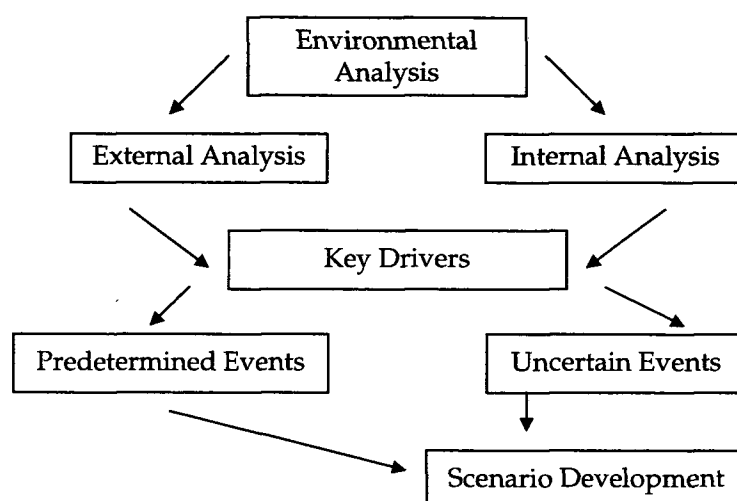
The analysis of the environment identified what factors may be key drivers of change in training and further education in the longer term, and judgements were made as to which of those were pre-determined and those that were uncertain. For example, it is predetermined that Victoria will have an ageing population. At the same time, the analysis revealed that the driver of change about which there was the most uncertainty related to the extent to which governments, enterprises or individuals are prepared to pay for training or further education. These individual, enterprise, and industry perceptions of the 'value' of training were seen, in turn, to affect a number of key issues:

- the level and pattern of demand for training, i.e. who will pay?;

- community values; and
- the nature and use of technology in the delivery of training.

The methodology to develop scenarios took the form outlined in the chart below.

Figure 1: Process adopted in developing scenarios



Within the dimensions of these predetermined and uncertain events, the scenarios were developed. Scenarios are stories about plausible alternative futures. They provide a basis for discussion about the future in a systematic way and provide an ongoing reference point for decision making and planning.

The purpose with scenarios is not to pinpoint events, but to reveal the main forces that are creating the future in the long term. The further into the future we look the more uncertain things become. Scenario planning embraces and uses this uncertainty to construct a number of views about how the future might unfold. Scenarios are not predictions of the most probable futures, but provide a range of alternative plausible futures.

5. STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE (RESEARCH)

Overview

Following the development of the scenarios, strategies were tested against them to form the Vision. The development of the Vision included a series of workshops involving OTFE management and staff, Adult, Community, and Further Education Board members, stakeholders including industry organisations, Industry Training Boards, academics, Adult and Community Education (ACE) Regional Councils and providers. Workshop participants for this and earlier stages were not chosen randomly but on the basis of the contribution they could make to the process. Drawn from a range of levels of seniority, they were chosen as people who influenced opinion and could leverage change. As such they tended to be aware of the broad policy settings of OTFE, the sector, the body of research and associated debate.

These workshops and consultations with stakeholders were used throughout the whole process, not just in developing the strategies, but also the environmental analysis and scenario planning. A dialogue was maintained with the Boards through regular briefings at each meeting throughout the development of the Visions.

The State Training Board's *Vision for Training and Further Education in Victoria* (1998a) and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board's *Taking ACE to the Year 2000* (1998) represent

the response of the two Boards to these challenges. They provide leadership in clear, concise and bold terms. The process provided the opportunity for research to influence these major planning statements in three ways:

- specific research commissioned to support the environmental analysis;
- the synthesis of earlier research commissioned by OTFE in areas of strategic importance; and
- the forums that facilitated the production of useful knowledge and understanding in relation to the drivers of change, future scenarios and flexible strategies through participants reflecting on these research findings and other research information of which all were independently aware.

5.2 Significance

The strategic Vision was developed by the State Training Board to provide a basis for leadership and direction in the development of detailed policies, strategies, action plans and services across the Victorian training system for the next five years. This Vision development was significant for a number of reasons. First, because developing a shared Vision will enable the training and further education sector to achieve the strategic changes necessary to thrive into the next century. Secondly, because OTFE undertook a new way of developing strategy - by developing scenarios of the future and testing current strategies against them.

In terms of the significance of the case study, it demonstrates that research can influence policy within a State Government Department in the training and further education context. This influence was facilitated by the scenario-planning process that expressly sought to intervene and provide space for ideological imperatives. The impact of research occurred through joint reflection and the distillation of new understanding. The influence of research can be seen and felt in such a process. The role of research and critically reflective debate is strengthened and rewarded through the licensing provided by such a process.

6. THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATION AND ITS PROCESSES

6.1 Overview

The Victorian State Training Service has been undergoing a period of decentralisation. TAFE Institutes are becoming more independent public sector organisations, and contestability of funding is increasing. The number of private training providers is increasing, and schools and universities are competing for the traditional training and further education student cohort, the 15-24-year olds undertaking entry level training. At the same time, globalisation of the world's markets is redefining the training industry.

These environmental trends have repercussions on planning because of the importance of recognising the changes and incorporating them within planning systems. Indeed, current management literature observes that management needs to provide strategic leadership by looking at both the internal and external strengths and weaknesses of their operating environment (Mintzberg, 1994). This can be applied to central management such as OTFE. The Office of Training and Further Education has three prime roles:

- stewardship of the values, mission and Vision of the organisation or organisational system;
- researcher of the systematic structures of the organisation or wider system; and
- designer of the organisation's and system's 'learning' process (OTFE, 1997, p. 11).

In addition to focussing on these roles, OTFE services the State Training Board, which has governance responsibilities outlined in the *Vocational and Training Act 1990*. The volatile environment that OTFE is in means that 'innovation is a priority, and so flexible, dynamic, project-oriented, organic forms of planning are now more necessary and relevant than the older mechanistic/functional forms' (OTFE, 1997, p. 7).

6.2 Activities

The Office of Training and Further Education is an administrative office of the Department of Education as mentioned in Section 2.2 above. OTFE supports the State Training Board, and the Adult, Community, and Further Education Board, and provides advice and support to the Minister for Tertiary Education and Training.

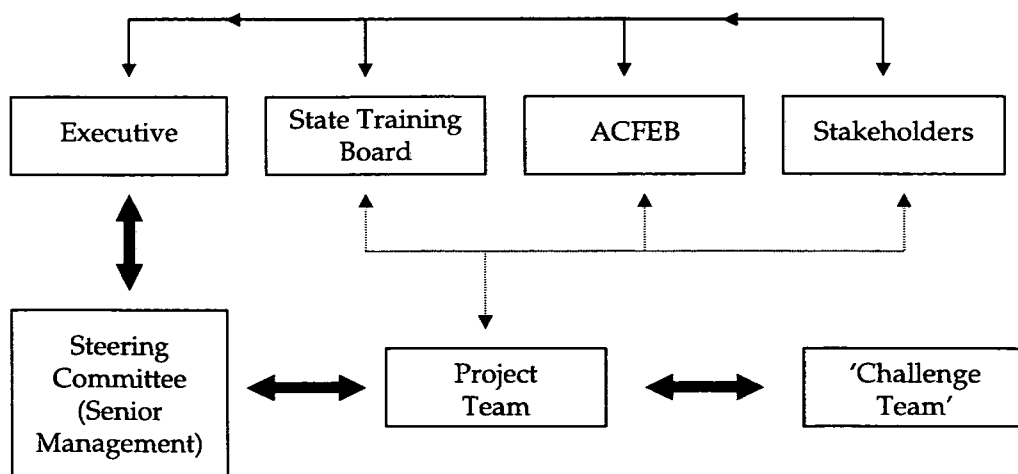
The primary functions of OTFE are to:

- advise and assist the Minister in the administration of training and further education matters, including provision of managerial, professional, and administrative services;
- support the State Training Board and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board in the exercise of their respective legislative functions;
- coordinate, allocate resources, and purchase places for the provision of VET and adult, community and further education services in Victoria in accordance with government policies and relevant legislation;
- ensure that industry advice is reflected in the policies and program delivery of the VET system;
- advise on VET policy and undertake strategic planning for the training system;
- plan and coordinate the provision of adult, community, and further education;
- represent the training and further education system in negotiations with the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments and the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA);
- shape and participate in national initiatives, and support providers in promoting innovation, quality assurance and the implementation of reform;
- support accreditation and recognition of training;
- participate in and shape national initiatives, and support providers in promoting innovation and implementing change; and
- plan the co-ordination and resourcing of the adult, community and further education sector.

6.3 Decision making

There were a number of key decision makers on this project: the Steering Committee, the Project Team and the Challenge Team. The Steering Committee was made up of three General Managers from OTFE, a sub-committee of the Executive. The Steering Committee was supported by a core Project Team of four people. The Challenge Team included staff from within OTFE; they were responsible for providing feedback and analysis throughout the project's development. The chart below (Figure 2) explains how the different groups operated.

Figure 2: Participants in the decision-making process



The Project Team conducted external workshops and consultations, and reported back to the Steering Committee. As described earlier, the workshops involved stakeholders from the training sector, and informal consultations were conducted where the opportunity arose. Informal consultations took place, for example, in planning network meetings, where TAFE Institute, Adult, Community, and Further Education, and Industry Training Board representatives were present.

The development of the Vision involved consultation across the State Training Service. However, the Project Team had overall responsibility for the development and success of the Visions. Because the project enabled a huge variety of stakeholders to influence the Vision, the study concentrates on the level of decision makers at OTFE who had significant involvement.

6.4 Research and research culture

Within OTFE, research is valued and viewed as core business. As a result of the constant change within the State Training Service, timely and responsive programs of research and development are seen to be very important. As a result of this view, the research and development structure of OTFE incorporates a Research Branch within the Strategic Planning and Research Division. The Research Branch supports OTFE and the State Training Service in undertaking research of strategic importance, both qualitative and quantitative, then reviews and disseminates findings and policy implications emanating from the wider body of research.

The Office of Training and Further Education (1995) produced a research strategy for 1995-1997 to provide a focus for activities to improve the quality and effectiveness of research in training and further education. The strategy was based on a number of principles that were designed to:

- provide an appropriate focus for research;
- result in the efficient utilisation of available funds;
- produce sound and useful research outcomes;
- support the wide dissemination of findings; and
- apply research outcomes productively.

Whilst at a Victorian level OTFE values research and is facilitating the transfer of this culture throughout the State Training Service, research historically has not been a high priority in the training and further education sector. The lack of research in the sector is being addressed at a national level with the advent of the Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council, its research-oriented recommendations and subsequent developments.

This has reinforced the Victorian approach, and the 1995-1997 strategy reflected all of these developments. The aim of the strategy was to develop a strong VET research culture that provides an extensive, relevant and expanding base of research findings to inform critical debate, and lead and underpin the development of policy and practice. The approaches to achieve this were to:

- maximise funding for research;
- guide research effort;
- improve the quality of research;
- increase the impact of research; and
- strengthen research infrastructure.

In tune with the view taken with regard to the definition of research in the background paper, OTFE similarly adopted a broad one in developing the strategy. The definition encompasses the full range of conceptual and empirical investigations undertaken to expand knowledge of training and further education.

As a result of these developments, the low priority for research generally in the sector, coupled with OTFE trying to promote research as central to the success of the training and further education sector, the impact of research within OTFE on a broad level has been varied. Needless

to say, the knowledge provided through findings of research has been used to determine policies and strategies. The impact of research has been direct and indirect. In the context of policy development, research is a critical addition to the policy debate, but not considered to be the only source for decision making. Indeed Nisbet and Broadfoot stated that research can, 'sharpen perceptions, stimulate discussion and encourage questioning - and thus create the possibility of change and improvement in the system' (1980, p. 66). In terms of the development of the Vision the impact of the research was integral and did just that.

With regard to the internal research and data collection, this happens in a number of ways. The staff in the Strategic Planning and Research Division either undertake the work, or commission private consultants to carry out the research and develop findings. Both the current and previous Directors of OTFE have championed the role of research in OTFE. They see the beneficial contribution it has provided to enable sound management of the State Training Service and leadership in the national VET system.

7. RELEVANT RESEARCH

7.1 Overview

As mentioned in the methodology the process involved:

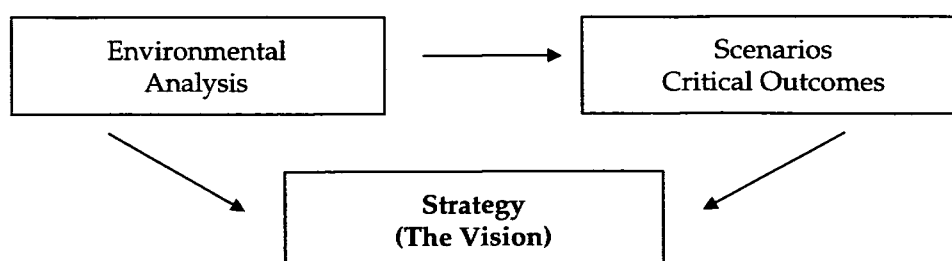
- scanning the internal and external environment to identify major change factors and themes - an *Environmental Analysis*;
- preparation of alternative views of the future using different pictures of the future (scenarios), to provide a background for the Board and OTFE to develop a Vision and strategies - *Scenario Planning*; and
- development of *Strategies* for the future, presented in *A Vision for Training and Further Education in Victoria - Vision Statement* (State Training Board of Victoria, 1998a) and *Taking ACE to the Year 2000* (ACFEB, 1998).

The environmental analysis was used to assist with the preparation of scenarios. These are mentioned in more depth in the methodology section of the case study. Suffice to say that the findings drawn from all of the forms of research were used to develop the Vision.

7.2 Details - the process

Undoubtedly the research undertaken had a significant impact on the development of the Vision. The interactions between the research findings and strategy formulation are illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: The planning process



As mentioned, the environmental analysis included interviews, internal research and workshops, an external workshop, as well as commissioned research which resulted in publications. The commissioned research was written by Stephen Billett et al. and titled, *VET Policy and Research: Emerging Issues and Changing Relationships* (1997). This commissioned research had a multiple

impact on the development of the Vision, as it enabled the Project Team to tease out the issues raised in later phases of the project.

The sixteen internal interviews with managers, conducted as part of the environmental analysis, were one area of the process where the results did not directly affect decisions. However, the information was useful insofar as it was a starting point: a perspective on the current thinking about the future within the organisation was gathered. The importance of this stage can also be linked to ensuring that the managers of OTFE were informed of the changes emanating in the development of the Vision.

The internal workshops and the research that was conducted were critical in the development of the Visions. The internal workshops processed the information that was found in commissioned and internal research projects. From this information the internal workshops (the Challenge Team) identified key drivers and critical uncertainties. The Challenge Team was also critical in testing mini-scenarios and fleshing out the key changes that needed to be made. Informal consultations were instrumental at the stage of testing the mini-scenarios also.

The external workshop gathered views about six provisional mini-scenarios the Project Team and Challenge Team had developed. Major stakeholders of the State Training Service were present to provide feedback by analysing the scenarios for plausibility, how they could be improved and if they could be merged into two to three narratives. The impact of the workshop was significant. The stakeholders' comments assisted the Project Team in rewriting the scenarios in terms of consolidating them into a few narratives and in determining the major themes.

The resulting strategy is radically different in comparison to traditional planning approaches. Often traditional approaches incorporate solutions to past problems, because the past is used as a predictor of the future. The actions to achieve each solution are also separate to the goal. This traditional approach to planning is inadequate because it is not forward looking and does not enable an organisation to cope with rapid change.

7.3 Decision making - the people

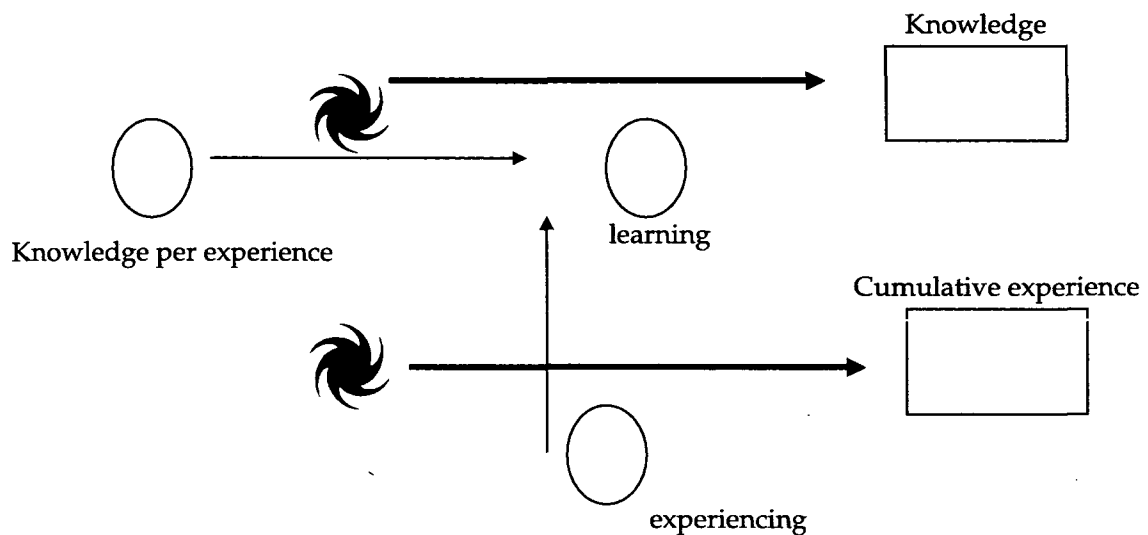
Until now the case study has described the process that was undertaken to develop the message for the Vision. There is another element that needs to be considered - the formation of ideas. This side of the puzzle refers to the interpreters of research, the people that use research that is specific to the Vision and other pre-existing research and knowledge to formulate their responses and actions.

So how does learning occur? Barry Richmond (1994) characterised learning based on experiences, as highlighted in the stocks and flow chart set out in Figure 4. Each experience is built into people's knowledge bank, which is often known as tacit knowledge. Because those involved in the Vision were selected because of their interest and role in OTFE, they brought with them large quantities of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is significant in terms of research because insights and strategies are developed on the basis of this knowledge.

The research task was spread as a conscious approach to foster learning and 'buy in', which fed into their strategy formulation for the Vision. The research that was undertaken touched many fields. It underpinned day-to-day actions and behaviours of the key challenge and Project Team members, and shows that healthy dialogue prevailed between research and policy making.

The research that was undertaken was analysed and synthesised as part of the process described earlier in the case study. One participant stated, 'years of experience and knowledge was supported by the research', illustrating the importance of research reports.

Figure 4: Richmond's (1994) characterisation of learning processes



Source: Richmond, B. (1994)

Rather than considering all of the research utilised, the description of the development of ideas is considered in the context of three of the key strategic directions drawn from the Vision. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the strategies form the framework that was developed as a result of the research. That is, that the research and analysis undertaken triggered and led the participants to the resulting strategies.

7.4 Building new relationships

The commissioned study by Billett et al. (1997) was important in supporting the development of ideas in relation to the Vision and specifically to the goal 'Building New Relationships'. The analysis presented in Billett et al. utilised a large number of literature sources, including the report *Enterprise Training: The Factors that Affect Demand* (Smith et al., 1995), completed by Charles Sturt University. The report considered what drives the provision of training and structural factors that influence the direction of the impetus to train. The report distinguished three levels of factors: global factors, industry factors, and enterprise factors which operate in combinations unique to each individual enterprise. The combination and integration of factors was seen to be particularly important in enterprise-training decisions. Another important finding from the report was that training is primarily an operational rather than a strategic issue in enterprises. The report *Enterprise Training: The Factors that Affect Demand* (Smith et al., 1995) identified the importance of consultation with industry in the formulation of policy directions, which was taken up in the Billett report.

The recommendation of Billett et al. (1997) for 'mutualities' in the relationships among clients in VET can be linked to the ideas discussed in the previous two reports. This report highlights the need to consider mutualities of interests among key stakeholder groups rather than just those of industry and enterprises. Billett et al. (1997) identify that increasingly these mutualities of interests are being addressed in the Victorian TAFE system, 'not so much competitive arrangements but partnerships and strategic alliances between TAFE Institutes and local enterprises and communities ...these relationships are held as fundamental to making training systems responsive to client demands' (Billett et al., 1997, p. 1).

In turn, these ideas developed through research reports were considered and incorporated into the Vision. We can see the story of 'Building New Relationships' unfolding by considering the findings and the ideas in these reports and realising that mutualities form part of the industry-specific strategies.

Another report which influenced the 'Building New Relationships' part of the Vision was the *Strategic Regional Planning for Industry Training Boards* (Grant et al., 1996) report. This report recommended that clarity was needed in defining industry size, structure, regional distribution and trends. This more regional orientation was picked up in the 'Building New Relationships' part of the Vision through its strategies that aim to 'set standards and curriculum locally, as well as at State and National levels, to suit individual needs and circumstances' (State Training Board, 1998a, p. 8).

7.5 Learning through life

There is a plethora of research literature available with regard to life long learning. Some of the reports that influenced thinking and the development of the 'learning through life' part of the Vision included: *Adult Education in a Polarising World: Education for All: Status and Trends* (UNESCO, 1997); The UK Government Green Paper, *The Learning Age: a Renaissance for a New Britain* (UK Department of Education and Employment, 1998); *The Work of Nations: A Blueprint for the Future* (Reich, 1991); *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* (European Commission on Education and Training, 1996); and many more reports from overseas and nationally.

A thread of ideas can be seen simply through the importance placed on learning through life in the literature and how to introduce the concept into public sector management. This push is based on facts drawn from the above-mentioned body of research. Specific articles that identify ideas that relate to this part of the Vision include, for example, the comments in the *Enterprise Training: The Factors that Affect Demand* report that called for greater emphasis on practical aspects of entry level training and access to ongoing programs (Smith et al., 1995). Building on the findings in this report, the broad strategies attached to the 'learning through life' part aim to, 'facilitate students' desire to acquire skills and knowledge not necessarily tied to qualifications' (State Training Board, 1998a, p. 9).

The *Competency-based Training in Victoria* (Foster, 1998) report picks up on this issue also. It reinforces comments drawn from the Billett report which states that 'current research and theorising on learning emphasises the social and cultural contexts of knowledge's acquisition' (Billet et al., 1997, p. 60). In other words, skill development is contextually determined and linked to the workplace. Competency-based training and assessment was intended to encourage an outcomes focus on training and to free training from a strict adherence to time served (State Training Board, 1998b, p. 17). The report *Competency-based Training in Victoria* (Foster, 1998) suggests that competency-based training needs to be considered further, that transfer of competence, even general competencies, may be limited. Similar comments follow in the scenarios booklet that 'narrow behavioural approaches to competency-based training will not be flexible enough for future skills needs and the range of workplaces' (State Training Board, 1998b, p. 18). The learning-through-life strategy seeks to broaden the criteria for granting accreditation of programs, picking up on this issue, and also aims to trigger students' desire to acquire skills and knowledge.

These types of reports and analyses were supported by analysis of ABS results. Graduate outcomes and outputs were compared by State, and over a number of years. Demographic trends, like the fact that a high percentage of women come from a non-English speaking background, supported the argument for an emphasis on learning through life. It also helped fashion a view about uncertainties in relation to the demand for training, especially when additional research found that people from a non-English speaking background have a low opinion of VET. This information was sourced from reports like the *Profiles of Women from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds in TAFE* (Chenglian and Basundhara, 1993).

7.6 Learning through new technologies

The Victorian Government will concentrate on the longer time frame - the time frame beyond 2000 and the establishment of an on-line world - and act vigorously now to gear our creative community, businesses and communications infrastructure for that world.

In the longer time frame Victoria's ability to compete in a world where telecommunications have removed geographic barriers to markets will be determined by a reputation for quality products, the skills of its people, the capacities of firms, the quality and efficiency of infrastructure and the attractiveness of the business environment (*Building Capability for the 21st Century*, Victoria 21 Strategy, <http://www.vic.gov.au/vic21>).

The 'learning through new technologies' strategy was developed in the context of State and Commonwealth Government policy. In 1995, the Victorian Government launched its interactive Multimedia (IMM) policy *Victoria 21: Directions for the Global Information Age*. The *Victoria 21* strategy is an integrated set of initiatives designed to build a networked and knowledge-based economy through new technologies to improve the competitiveness of all industries across the State of Victoria.

In 1994, the Commonwealth Government provided support for the development of a viable Australian multimedia industry through its cultural policy *Creative Nation*. Then, in March 1996, the Kennett Government released its VET policy and appointed what is believed to be the world's first Minister for Multimedia.

Commonwealth and State Government policies were based on extensive research. For example, the *Victoria 21 Strategy* aims to establish Victoria as a global centre of information technology and communications excellence. This strategy was based on extensive international and national research findings. They have a dedicated Policy and Planning Unit that commissions research. *Use and Usability: A Guide to Designing Interactive Multimedia for the Public* (Schofield and Flute, 1998) provides practical guidance for multimedia producers to follow in Victoria. Julia Schofield Consultants (JSC) Ltd. were commissioned by Multimedia Victoria to initially design an easily usable system for electronic services delivery for the Victorian Government, and later reproduced the above book for the wider public. JSC are described by Microsoft Corporation as 'possibly the leading multimedia supplier in the world'. This highlights pre-existing research that influenced decision making at Multimedia Victoria, and in turn impacted upon decision making at OTFE.

The developers of the Vision on new technologies also cited a number of other publications which influenced the Vision, such as *Education in the Information Society* (Lepani, 1995). Another important report was the *Connectivity, Convergence and Vocational Training: New Communication Technologies in VET* (Spark, Jones, Miller and Scorgie, 1996) report. It identified a widespread use of a range of technologies, including computer-based and computer-mediated training, teleconferencing, video, audio and facsimile. In most cases reports such as these were considered and utilised to form opinion.

Connectivity, Convergence and Vocational Training: New Communication Technologies in VET (Spark et al., 1996) also drew attention to the strategic implications of the increasingly 'convergent and connected' characteristics of new technologies, their cost, and the global environment in which they are being developed and promoted. Thus, decisions by the VET sector about the use of technology increasingly need to be made in consultation with other sectors, suppliers and stakeholders.

The research literature on new learning technologies in VET, including *A Planning Model for Innovation: New Learning Technologies* (Mitchell and Bluer, 1997), have identified the increasing sophistication of technology, economic reform and the resulting restructuring and re-skilling of the Australian workforce. Re-skilling to meet changed work requirements is increasingly vital, which in turn means that communications and information technology will have an enhanced role in the future.

These comments illustrate that, in formulating the strategy for technology, the 'knowledge brokers', the developers of the Vision, used research products. Many staff would say that keeping in touch with the sector involves scanning the ether for relevant and new research material all the time. This would not be limited to commissioned research reports, but also to newsletters, web pages, discussion groups, conferences and wider networks which all can be classified as research.

There is no doubt that staff involved in the development of the Vision used their intellectual capital significantly.

7.7 Other influences

The scenario planning methodology was underpinned by the 'systems thinking' or 'futures thinking' approach. Research used to develop understandings in the Office include *The Art of the Long View* (Schwartz, 1996), *Scenarios - The Art of Strategic Conversation* (Van Den Heijden, 1996) and several more texts and journal articles.

Market research undertaken by a variety of organisations was also influential in developing people's ideas. The issues ranged from what affects the demand for training, future participation rates in training, the role of training and further education *vis-à-vis* higher education, to the perceptions of the Australian training and further education system. The information gleaned from these studies influenced the overall direction of the strategies because it outlined what clients wanted now and indicated where their needs would lie in the future. These issues and themes were built into the resulting strategies.

This account of ideas formation and process development shows that research undertaken in relation to the subject of the Vision had a significant effect on the final outcome. Ideas sourced from research developed in a direct and indirect diffuse way. However, each link in the chain improved and assisted in learning and developing strategies.

8. WHY DID IMPACT OCCUR?

The Office of Training and Further Education made the time to engage in research, and used lots of information sources. The scenario-planning stage of the process was very useful because it sorted out the complexities that were found with the research undertaken in the environmental planning stage. As Margaret Vickers stated (1995), often the problem with the relationship between policy and research stems from the fact that research reveals complex problems, whilst to develop policy you need clarity. As a result of the scenario-planning phase, the Challenge Team, Project Team, workshops and consultations condensed the complex issues identified into a strategy.

The mixed research method used in developing the Vision covered all of the critical issues necessary in strategy formulation. This issue is important because often a single piece of research does not address all the factors at hand. For example, major considerations for OTFE are public reactions, financial costs, and political implications of the policy. These are big picture issues which are not typically considered in commissioned research. The qualitative research ensured that these issues were effectively addressed. After all, commissioned research could not be expected to take into account the broader framework within which State Government operates, such as the government's policies and priorities, the Minister's policy priorities, the law, etc.

The practice of research, by definition, means that investigation and analysis are undertaken about a given issue and result in an increase of knowledge. In this circumstance the process used to develop the Vision did result in an increase of knowledge. The process from investigation and analysis to judgement and knowledge involved a number of steps. Terri Seddon summarises these steps as firstly, 'investigation and analysis aimed at producing information or knowledge about the issue', followed by 'other people and agencies (including other researchers) judging and validating this knowledge that has been produced' (1997, p. 2). This attributes the first step to researchers themselves, and the second step to others who have the important role of validating the knowledge, so that it is publicly endorsed.

This explanation of the research cycle can be compared to the way OTFE developed its strategic Vision, the way it utilised research. The publications and the other sets of actions undertaken in the environmental analysis were used to validate and further develop the knowledge that was created. The journey to get there was the use of scenarios, so that the people involved were hot-

wired to the situations as they arose. For OTFE the strategy had to be validated within the Office before it could begin to be validated more publicly.

The Office of Training and Further Education's Research Strategy demonstrates a will to engage with the research community to add to the policy debate. However, the process undertaken to develop the Vision illustrates that research cannot be directly linked to a decision, it cannot unequivocally tell policy makers what to do. Research can make an informed contribution to the policy debate, but not be the only one.

Research is often subject to 'fads and fashions, to competing, ill-defined, and sometimes contradictory goals' (Furlong, 1998, p. 23). For example, researchers can be faced with developing a number of dissemination methods for one piece of research because of the marketing demands and client orientation prevalent in the current environment. At the same time researchers have to provide evidence and apply objectivity in their work. As a result of these contradictions what follows is research that is tied to social and political pressures:

The connection between research and practice is not one in which research influences practice, as many researchers might hope, nor one in which practice influences research as many might hope, but rather one in which both research and practice are influenced by and are perhaps even victims of the same shifting social and political context (Kennedy, 1997, pp. 9-10).

The government has aggressively pursued a policy mix with a focus on results, a preference for market mechanisms, and minimising government bureaucracy, amongst others. The notion of Victoria as a 'contract State' has also had ramifications on how the public sector does its business. In the training and further education context the purchaser/provider role distinction is very important.

Alford and O'Neill (1995) characterise new roles, new accountabilities and new institutions in Victoria, whereby activity was previously subjected to organisational hierarchy, and is now governed by contracts (or quasi contracts). Examples of the contract State are: employment agreements in comparison to tenure until retirement; charters outlining the Vision and goals of agencies such as the State Revenue Office; a local council putting its home care services out to competitive tendering; or the State Electricity Commission being abolished and replaced by its three successors.

Altogether these political changes have ramifications on the training and further education sector. These political contexts undoubtedly had an impact on the development of the Vision.

9. TWO OTHER MATTERS

9.1 Time-line for the vision development

The draft strategy development phase of the project plan was completed by December 1997, but several months were required to negotiate the decision process and receive Ministerial and State Training Board approval. Further details are provided in Figure 5.

9.2 Validation

Evidence of an externally validated impact of the Vision relates to interest from international organisations and other State Governments within Australia. The Vision has had an impact on the national policy discussion at Chief Executive Officer level and scenario planning and strategic issues will be the subjects of an ANTA national project under Victoria's co-ordination in 1999. The Vision documents were selected for the US Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education. The impact on the wider VET community in Victoria is growing as the dissemination phase proceeds.

Figure 5: Time-line for the development of the vision

[illegible]

10. SUMMARY

The case study shows that OTFE has integrated research in creative ways to develop a Vision statement. The results of the process, in the form of the Vision and Scenarios, can be viewed at the OTFE homepage (www.otfe.vic.gov.au).

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THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH ON THE ABORIGINAL RURAL TRAINING PROGRAM

Geoff Creek¹

1. THE CONTEXT

1.1 Background

During 1989 Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture (MCA) commenced providing training to Aboriginal people working on Aboriginal-owned properties in far western NSW. The two properties initially identified for training were 'East Bootingee Station', Menindee and 'Weinteriga Station', Wilcannia. The initial program provided for eight student places from each property and involved the delivery of six one-week blocks of training for each property over a twelve-month period. Prior to 1989, the College had limited experience with providing training for indigenous people. However, since then the College has worked successfully with communities to develop and deliver 'tailor-made' training programs to Aboriginal participants on Aboriginal-owned properties.

The College's accredited Certificate II in Rural Skills (Aboriginal Communities) and the 'Aboriginal Rural Workplace Supervisors Course' (ARWSC) were designed and developed in close consultation with Aboriginal organisations and communities.

Currently Murrumbidgee College has forty-five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in its accredited courses. Enrolled students are from rural and remote areas of NSW.

The College received funding from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) to deliver its accredited Aboriginal Rural Workers Course to participants from Cherbourg, Woorabinda and Charleville communities in Queensland in 1996. This involved interstate cooperation with the Nurunderi College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in Cherbourg as well as liaison with the Cherbourg Council. The College also received funding from the NSW Department of Training and Education Coordination (DTEC) to provide the Aboriginal Rural Workers Course to people from the Murrin Bridge community at Lake Cargelligo and the Warrana Aboriginal Employment Training and Development Corporation at Warren. DTEC also funded another intake of students into the ARWSC, with participants coming from across all regions of NSW.

1.2 The organisations

Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture is one of two providers of farm-based residential vocational education and training (VET) in agriculture that are operated by NSW Agriculture. The goals of the Department's two agricultural colleges are:

- to improve the skills, knowledge and attitude of departmental clients through full-time and part-time youth and adult education programs; and
- to provide VET for the food and fibre industries of NSW and Australia in cooperation with TAFE NSW and other education providers.

The College's operational budget and permanent staff are provided by NSW Agriculture from the NSW Government's Consolidated Fund. In addition, the College successfully competes for external funds for a number of programs, including the Aboriginal Rural Training Program (ARTP). The ARTP commenced in 1989 and it is managed as a fully self-funding unit of the College, providing accredited courses in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Currently four staff are employed by the ARTP.

The College works in collaboration with a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in NSW and across Australia, as well as other organisations that operate in support of VET for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These organisations include Aboriginal Lands

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Councils, Aboriginal Corporations, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Training Advisory Council (ATSIPTAC), ANTA, DTEC and NSW Department of Corrective Services.

1.3 The research

Context

The reasons that particular research is carried out are varied. Research of all the collaborating organisations involved in ARTP has a common purpose that is best expressed in the Terms of Reference of ATSIPTAC (1997), which is to develop:-

- a) strategies to maximise outcomes for Indigenous Australians as sought in the National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training (VET);
- b) the VET resourcing needs for Indigenous Australians;
- c) mechanisms to improve coordination between Indigenous related employment, economic development, labour market programs and VET programs; and
- d) measures necessary to ensure Indigenous peoples achieve educational outcomes equity in vocational education and training by the turn of the century and progress the twenty-one goals of the National and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy.

Funding sources for research vary from organisation to organisation. Some research is funded from components of internal budgets. Some research is carried out under contracted research arrangements, which are mainly funded by government.

Methodology

Collection and analysis of data and associated quantitative research is carried out by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other government agencies. This information is readily available, and is very useful for planning and policy development as well as improving practice and delivery of VET. It needs to be remembered, however, that the validity of this research is based upon the assumption that the data collection is sound - which is not always correct.

Qualitative research methods are more frequently used and involve structured and unstructured interviews, surveys, discussions and meetings with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations. Particular care and sensitivity needs to be taken by non-indigenous people and organisations to ensure that the research that is undertaken is in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations. The research methodology must be inclusive and involve careful consultation and negotiation as the results must have joint ownership. Cultural issues and the need for self-empowerment and control by Indigenous communities must be integrated into the research ethic.

The availability of the research findings is variable as some of the research is oral, i.e. centred on discussion and negotiation. The research may become embedded in curriculum and course documentation or in improved training methodologies. Often findings will be available in reports, policy documents and the like or will be incorporated into staff development activities or training strategies.

1.4 Significance

This case study is significant as in 1988 the College did not have any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in any of its courses. At the College's 1997 Conferring of Awards Ceremony one-third of the College graduates were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This has been a remarkable achievement in eight years and is a function of a large number of factors, including the development of an internal college climate that fosters investigation, inquiry, reflection, questioning of the *status quo* and a yearning to liaise with clients to determine their needs.

This outward client focus has meant that staff have developed their negotiation and research skills. They seek and assess many sources of information so that they can apply the research to better meet the VET needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. This active training culture generates an attitude of continuous improvement and a strong desire to analyse and monitor training programs, and to develop a better understanding of policy and planning issues that have an impact on their work.

Staff have come to realise quickly that they have a great deal to learn from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities with whom they work in partnership. This has resulted in refinement, extension and development of not only the College's Aboriginal Rural Training Program but also of the staff of the College and the communities they work with.

2. THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATION AND ITS PROCESSES

2.1 Overview - education and NSW Agriculture

The provision of tertiary education by NSW Agriculture is a responsibility shared by the C B Alexander Agricultural College and the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. These colleges provide courses that are practically based with immediate application to general farm management.

To meet the education and training needs of the food and fibre industries, Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture runs a variety of courses, including full-time residential courses, traineeships, vocational courses, home study courses and short courses. These courses provide further training in financial management, measures to counteract salinity in irrigation areas, the successful implementation of conservation farming, production issues relating to better marketing of primary products, and efficient use of agricultural chemicals.

The home study program caters for food and fibre producers who are disadvantaged by time constraints or remoteness. Packages of information are supplemented by local tutorials and residential schools. Vocational and short courses are developed following an expression of need by rural people for specific information and training. Courses take the form of conferences, workshops, seminars, workplace training and field days.

The College's courses are widely promoted to ensure that NSW Agriculture's education programs are accessible to clients. Annual validation surveys are completed to facilitate the continual curriculum development process of the College. Courses are accredited by the NSW Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board.

New external funding sources for training programs are sought through sponsorship, research and development corporations and other government agencies. This allows NSW Agriculture to extend the provision of its education programs. Visits to the College by school groups are actively encouraged. Facilities are used by schools, the Department of School Education, teacher associations and other tertiary institutions.

2.2 Activities

The College commenced operation in February 1963, as part of the Yanco Agricultural Research Station. There were thirty-eight students in the first intake. The first course, the Farm Certificate Course, was a one-year course aimed at training the sons of farmers who wished to return to the family farm.

In 1965, the College was named the Yanco Agricultural College, a name which was retained until 1981.

The first Advanced Certificate Course was not introduced until 1971. This course was known as the Advanced Certificate in Irrigation and was aimed at training people who eventually wished to manage irrigation farms.

The first female students enrolled at the College in 1972 and since then there have been female students enrolled at the College every year.

In 1974 another second year course, the Advanced Certificate in Animal Production, was introduced. However, despite satisfactory enrolments in the first two years of its operation, it was decided to terminate this course in 1976 and offer a more general course in agriculture to take its place. This course was called the Advanced Certificate in Agriculture and is still being offered as one of the advanced courses today.

As a result of requests from graziers in the Western Division of NSW, a course designed to suit the needs of the people in this area was commenced in 1977. This course was originally referred to as the Advanced Certificate in Pastoral Zone Management, but it was later renamed the Advanced Certificate in Rangeland Management. Because of low enrolments in the early 1980s, it was decided to shelve this course until demand increased. The College carried out curriculum development in pastoral property management and introduced an elective in this area in the Certificate in Agriculture course in 1990. In 1991 twelve students enrolled in a new Advanced Certificate in Pastoral Property Management. The curriculum for this course was developed as a result of extensive liaison with the pastoral industry.

During 1981, the College was renamed the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture to overcome the problem of confusion of identity with the Yanco Agricultural High School. At the end of 1981 a major review of the College functions was undertaken by the Department of Agriculture. One of the most significant changes to be introduced as a result of the review was the introduction of a short-course program, which commenced in 1986 following the appointment of the Manager of Short Course Services. Other changes included the introduction of an off-campus practical work-experience program with farmers for all full-time students.

A practical skills training program for first-year students was introduced in 1986, as well as a similar program for more advanced skills for all second-year students. The College piloted the new Rural Traineeship program in 1989 and has continued providing off-the-job training for rural trainees since then. In 1992 the College also successfully introduced the new Pig Attendant Traineeship program.

In association with the poultry industry, the College developed a successful industry training program based on the traineeship model. The new Certificate in Poultry Production was introduced in 1991 and has been well received by industry. The College has been developing home study materials for the poultry industry with funding from the Egg Industry Research and Development Council and the Chicken Meat Research and Development Council.

The successful Aboriginal Rural Training Program was developed at the College in 1989 for Aboriginal staff of 'East Bootingee' (Menindee) and 'Weinteriga' (Wilcannia) stations. This unique training program resulted from extensive consultation with the Aboriginal people involved, station managers, the Department of Employment, Education and Training and the Aboriginal Development Commission (now known as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC]). This program has been extended and in 1996 ANTA funded the College to deliver its accredited Aboriginal Rural Worker Course to people in Cherbourg, Woorabinda and Charleville in Queensland. This was a cooperative venture with the Nurunderi College of TAFE at Cherbourg. The NSW Department of Training and Education Coordination also funded participants from Warren and Murrin Bridge to enrol in the program in 1996.

In 1995 the College initiated discussions with the viticulture and wine industries to ascertain their training needs. As a result the College became an accredited provider of the national Certificate II in Food Processing (Wine), with most of the training being provided in the workplace. The first graduates of the program had their awards conferred in 1997. The College has been supported in this program by the NSW Food Industry Training Council and has been accredited to provide other food processing training programs for industry.

2.3 Decision making

At the College and in the community decisions about the ARTP are made cooperatively after consultation, discussion and negotiation. This continuous research and review means that investigations and inquiry are collaborative, both internally between staff as well as between staff and community organisations and members. Thus the findings of a training needs analysis are achieved

by consensus between the College and the community in that the curriculum, delivery mode and methodology, training locations and timing are all negotiated and agreed to by everyone. Decisions made are flexible and can be renegotiated by the ARTP coordinator and community representatives when needed.

The College seeks input concerning the ARTP not only from specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities seeking VET, but also from other organisations and other agencies such as those detailed earlier in this paper. The College's Advisory Council is also able to have an input into the ARTP as well as the wider network of organisations and training providers that the College interacts with.

External factors that have an impact on decision making include:

- priorities of external funding providers for the ARTP;
- changes in government policy;
- opportunities for developing new projects and services;
- emerging needs for community and business development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- willingness of other organisations to work collaboratively with the College;
- findings of external quality assurance surveys;
- literature reviews; and
- reports and papers presented at seminars and conferences.

2.4 Research

NSW Agriculture has a long history of research and development and so its staff have a strong commitment to applied research in the food and fibre industries. In the past, many research organisations and funding bodies have had difficulty in facilitating the uptake and implementation of research findings, so that the technology developed is effectively transferred.

There is an increasing trend for organisations to have cross-discipline teams involved with research programs, so that the researcher interacts with and is guided by the team, which includes staff who will be implementing the research as well as clients or industry representatives who will want to apply the research findings. Thus there is value in having VET research carried out within a similar framework to that of applied scientific research. This will result in research being valued not only by the research and the funding body, but also by the people, community and industry that have been involved in the research.

Trainers in the community will then become committed to and own the research. Thus training needs analyses, quality assurance surveys, research projects and reports will be seen as essential tools for not only the trainers but also the people they are working with. This results in a wider ownership and greater impact of research findings, as well as a growing use and commitment to both the process and results of research. It is important that VET practitioners develop a positive attitude to ongoing research and become active supporters and users of research methods and findings. Otherwise research will be seen to be only important to policy developers and planners, researchers and funding bodies.

3. RELEVANT RESEARCH

3.1 Aboriginal Rural Training Program (ARTP)

The ARTP developed from a request from DEET in 1989 for the College to investigate the training needs of two Aboriginal rural properties at Menindee and Wilcannia, in western NSW, with a view to delivering some relevant agriculture training. This initial research was carried out on the properties with the Aboriginal communities by College staff. The trainers also continued to investigate and renegotiate the delivery and methodology of VET with the participants and community during the course. At the end of the project external education consultants were employed to undertake a quality

assurance survey with participants, the results of which were then available to not only the funding body but also to the course participants and their community (Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, 1989 and 1992). The findings and process of this initial research have had a very significant impact on the ARTP and have 'set the stage' for on-going and interactive research, investigation and collaboration by the College and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to ensure that the ARTP continues to meet the needs of communities and individuals.

Since the ARTP commenced ATSIC has recommended that there should be an increase in access to rural-based training programs, both in rural training centres and also on Aboriginal-owned properties. In particular, ATSIC has proposed that appropriate nationally accredited rural skills training courses should be developed, as well as training in rural enterprise development (ATSIC, 1994). Murrumbidgee College has developed specific Aboriginal rural courses, namely the accredited Aboriginal Rural Workers Course and the Aboriginal Rural Workplace Supervisors Course. These courses were developed collaboratively with communities and the College has recently developed the Certificate II in Rural Skills (Aboriginal Communities) as a result of its research and consultation with the communities.

During the delivery of the ARTP the College has found, in consultation with property managers, property directors, potential participants and local Aboriginal community members, that the majority of potential students had had negative educational experiences in the past at both secondary school and post-secondary school level. This is consistent with the national findings that 'Forty two per cent (42%) of indigenous people leave school before the age of 16' (ANTA 1996a, Appendix 1, p. 2). The reasons given for these negative experiences varied; however, the following issues were of major concern and were reported to ARTP staff by participants:

- *relevance of course content* - clients strongly indicated that a majority of the course content they had previously experienced was not relevant; 'we had to learn what they (teachers) wanted us to learn not what we wanted to learn'.
- *learning environment* - clients indicated that they had to travel away from their community to a strange place with unfamiliar faces; lack of adequate support by staff, the educational institution and the learning environment while being away did not facilitate effective learning by the students.
- *teaching strategies* - these were not appropriate to the learning styles of the clients. Comments such as 'we had to sit in classrooms for up to two and three hours', 'we had to learn it all from a book', and 'we wanted more practical work' suggested inappropriate teaching strategies in the past.
- *inappropriate behaviour of teaching staff* - comments such as 'they (teachers) treated us like kids', 'they (teachers) wouldn't listen to us' and 'they (teachers) used big words which we couldn't understand' were common.

As a result of these issues not being addressed, students would not attend formal classes and therefore did not complete the course. These and other comments made by potential clients raised an awareness about the need to address a culture which required a different educational approach to that traditionally experienced by the College (Creek and McPherson, 1996). Getting training into the communities was dependent upon the close consultation with the communities during course design and development. Careful consideration and attention was given to the following: relevance of course content; suitable learning environments; learning styles of Indigenous people; appropriate teaching strategies; appropriate learner activities; appropriate methods of assessment; and suitable teachers.

It is essential to have extensive consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities and individuals as part of the process of a training needs analysis. Extensive consultation is required to resolve a range of issues that will have a significant impact on the development of the curriculum and appropriate arrangements for delivery of training. The course must come from the clients and not from an existing 'on-the-shelf' curriculum. The College's informal research findings have been validated by others who have found that this process is essential, as 'Community consultation is the most critical area in any education and training program being considered for Aboriginal people' (Keenihan, 1996, p. 4).

During Murrumbidgee College's initial visit to properties to conduct the training needs analysis students did not express an interest in attending the College. This is consistent with the findings that 'Aboriginal students are under immense pressure when they leave their communities to attend an educational institution' (Keenihan, 1996, p. 5). It is critically important that students' past bad experiences, such as being forced to leave their communities, are not repeated.

Current research by Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture shows that communities and participants choose to have some training provided on their property and some provided at the College. The decision is theirs. Thus the curriculum needs to reflect that some communities will prefer training provided at the workplace and others will require training delivered at another site. Other communities would prefer to have some training delivered at the workplace and some at another site (e.g. at the campus of a training provider). Some may prefer that the training be delivered by the provider as a residential course. This is consistent with the findings of the ATSIC Draft Strategy (ATSIC, 1994, p. 61).

The curricula and associated training materials need to reflect the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often have a preference for a learning style that is different to that delivered to other students. The training should include group learning activities. The curriculum documents, and training providers, need to acknowledge that a more experiential learning style is often more appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The development of the curricula needs to address this issue. Teaching strategies and learner activities must be appropriate to the learning styles of the students if effective learning is to occur. Jimbidie (1993) outlines Aboriginal adult concepts of learning and ways of learning. She notes that the most common ways are:

- (1) Group work or performance - Aboriginal people are group oriented and prefer working together rather than working individually.
- (2) Observation - Aboriginal people learn a lot by observation, more so than by reading textual materials. This is partly due to the fact that many Aboriginal people in communities are not sufficiently literate to fully understand the western educational system.
- (3) Trial and error - this refers to the practising of a certain task or skill. If a mistake is made then he or she will try again until they have mastered the skill.
- (4) Practical hands-on training - this is learning something through practice.

In her paper, Jimbidie states that:

Content, Method and Strategies involved in Aboriginal adult learning has to be relevant and culturally appropriate - it needs to take Aboriginal culture into consideration. Aboriginal people will progress if the programs which are conducted in adult education centres are culturally appropriate, by this we mean that Aboriginal culture and concepts of teaching and learning are taken into account (ibid p. 6).

Jimbidie's observations confirm the College's research and experience, and reinforce the findings of both the ATSIC Draft Strategy (ATSIC, 1994) and Howard (1995).

Further confirmation of these findings and conclusions, from an extensive Australia-wide research program, are given by McIntyre et al. (1997) and Buchanan and Egg (1997) in their ANTA-funded research reports. These research reports on *Culture Matters* describe in considerable detail the factors that affect the outcomes of participation in VET by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which are consistent with the College's experience.

4. USE AND INFLUENCE OF RESEARCH

A positive impact of the College's research has been that, because the research findings have been implemented (i.e. the training needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are being met), the College is perceived as being different to other VET providers by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities. The College is their preferred VET provider. The College

Principal and the Coordinator of ARTP have been invited to join the ATSIPTAC National Networking Group, which assists ATSIPTAC in the development of strategic advice to the ANTA Board.

The research has also fostered the development of a more client-focussed culture in the College, such that other staff are now committed to stronger liaison with industry, as well as a keen desire to access written research and reports on VET to ensure that they are implementing 'best practice'. Staff are no longer satisfied with only continuing to provide VET for traditional clients but are now involved in new VET business, including viticulture and food-processing training.

Prior to the development of the ARTP the College had not applied for external funds, but had simply relied on funding from the NSW Government Consolidated Revenue Fund. There were no externally funded College staff. The College is now strongly committed to researching industry's VET needs and developing external funding submissions to meet these needs because of the successful ARTP precedent. A significant number of such submissions are developed in collaboration with other programs within the Department (NSW Agriculture), whereas previously the College had never made any application for funding from research and development funds or other government sources. The College now employs eighteen externally funded staff, four of whom are involved in the ARTP, and expects to employ a further six staff from external funds by the end of the year. Other externally funded VET programs include viticulture, food processing, vertebrate pest management, production horticulture, poultry production, irrigation, pastoral, workplace trainer and assessor programs.

The College's commitment to researching the VET needs of industry, and actively seeking increasing levels of external funding so that it can provide for these needs, is now seen as core business of the College. In this way it is adapting the external funding model of many of the research programs of NSW Agriculture by developing and applying its VET programs around researched industry needs. By analysing and refining its research findings the College, like the research programs of the Department, is better able to provide for industry's needs and so continues to have industry support and endorsement for its external funding applications.

This research and client focus has made the College innovative and outward looking. There has been no hesitation by College staff in embracing the concept and practice of 'user choice' or competition. College staff have also been very proactive in being involved in supporting VET (new apprenticeships and traineeships) in schools. The College has established an externally funded home study and publications unit, which researches the needs for training materials for the food and fibre industries and then develops external funding submissions to implement these VET proposals.

In 1989 the only College graduates were students from its full-time courses. At the 1997 conferring of awards ceremony only one-third of graduates were full-time students. One-third were part-time ARTP graduates and the remaining third were part-time students from other externally funded programs. This significant change is a direct result of the impact of initial and on-going research in the ARTP and the 'flow-on' effect this has had on the College, its staff, culture and mission.

5. IMPEDIMENTS TO USING RESEARCH

There are significant sources of research that can be used (ANTA 1996b, 1997 and Johnson, 1991). However, the problem for VET practitioners and participants is how to easily access, adapt and implement the findings. This dilemma is no different to that faced by research in other disciplines, as it is not uncommon for research to be seen to be the province of the researchers and the funding body. The tendency for research reports to end up on shelves and in pigeonholes is not peculiar to VET.

In an era of economic rationalism and tight budgeting there are difficulties for VET practitioners to have time to seek out and investigate research findings that are relevant to them, their work and their clients. There are not many specific performance indicators for reflection, contemplation, synthesis, reconstruction and analysis for VET practitioners.

To overcome these barriers it is necessary for practitioners and participants in VET to be research collaborators and investigators themselves, as part of a cooperative VET research team. There is a significant trend among funding bodies of applied scientific research to enunciate in their strategic

plans a need for research proposals to include technology transfer of the research outcomes, i.e. planned implementation of the research results. Conversely, there would be value in VET funding bodies considering including a research component in submissions for funding delivery of VET.

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REVIEW OF THE TAFE NSW RESOURCE ALLOCATION MODEL AND THE IMPACT ON THE SYDNEY INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Brian Jones¹

1. THE CONTEXT

1.1 Background

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s public sector organisations throughout Australia have experienced high states of uncertainty. The relative peace and tranquillity of the 1960s and 1970s have been replaced by a strong focus on management efficiency obtained through cutting costs and improving service delivery. There are now greater demands for accountability and increased effectiveness by managers at all levels of an organisation (Funnell, 1996; Gregory, 1997).

At the same time progress in information management and communications technologies have provided opportunities for managers at all levels to be questioned and challenged on the appropriateness of the decisions they make. The argument is put that in order to complement financial and structural reforms of government agencies, the use of various measurement parameters provides a powerful internal tool to examine reasons for poor performance, especially with regard to resource allocation (Carrington, Connelly and Puthcheary, 1996).

Public sector vocational education and training (VET) organisations have not been immune to the changes described above. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), for example, has suggested that a number of key measures, designed to describe the condition and features of the VET sector, be introduced and comparisons made between the States and Territories with regard to their respective performance (ANTA, 1996).

It is against this background and management climate that this case study is developed. The study begins in 1993 with a suggestion by the Technical and Further Education Commission of NSW (TAFE NSW) that a new policy of resource allocation be introduced. The case study outlines the research leading to this and its current status. The response of a single Institute to this suggestion up to the present time is also described.

1.2 The organisations involved in the case study

Two organisations are involved in this case study. The first is TAFE NSW. This Commission is the largest supplier of VET in Australia, offering a total of over 1,400 courses to over 400,000 students. Programs are delivered through eleven Institutes located across NSW and also through the Open Training and Education Network. In 1995 TAFE NSW provided 82.6 million annual student contact hours (SCH) which was over 95% of NSW Government-funded VET activity (NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training 1996).

The second organisation is the Sydney Institute of Technology. This Institute is one of eleven Institutes that are responsible for the delivery of VET programs within TAFE NSW. The Sydney Institute of Technology is the largest of these Institutes and is the most diverse provider of VET programs in Australia. Over 700 course are offered and approximately 200 of these are exclusive to the Institute. Enrolments exceed 50,000 students each year with programs delivered across six campuses located within the Sydney metropolitan area (TAFE NSW, 1997). The Institute has an annual operating budget of over \$160 million and delivers over 12 million SCHs each year. The responsibility for delivery of VET programs is with six Faculties. Each Faculty has a hierarchical administrative structure with Head Teachers responsible for the management of individual teaching sections. These Head Teachers report to Heads of Study, who, in turn, report to a Faculty Director.

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The case study has been developed from the perspective of a staff member of the Sydney Institute of Technology and, unless cited, any views expressed are those of the writer.

1.3 Research and the case study

The case study presents two examples of research in VET. The first example follows the publication of a research report in 1994, following extensive research requested by the Budget Allocation Bases Review Group of TAFE NSW. This research, influenced as previously mentioned by the NSW Government, moves towards increased accountability, investigated the costs involved in delivering NSW Government-funded vocational and education programs within TAFE NSW. The research was concerned with providing information on any variations that occurred when the costs incurred by individual Institutes in the delivery of similar programs were compared. The actual research was carried out by the TAFE NSW Planning and Evaluation Group. This group was well resourced, staff were well qualified and they had wide experience in conducting research projects covering a range of vocational and education issues, including policy and planning.

Following this research, TAFE NSW then developed a resource allocation model (RAM) that was to be the basis on which resources required by individual Institutes would be determined (TAFE NSW, 1993).

The second example of research is the response by a single Institute, the Sydney Institute of Technology, to the release of the resource allocation model described above. This example describes how the research process can assist in organisational development through a structured and systematic approach. The first concerns about the impact of the resource allocation model initially came from a small group of managers at the Institute. As these problems gradually became more specific and more clearly defined, it was realised that this impact could concern many operational areas. The first response from managers was *ad hoc* but, over time, eventually took on some of the characteristics of an action research model. These characteristics can be briefly identified as the following stages of a research process: problem identification; the accumulation of evidence and inferences; generalisations regarding the relationship between actions and the desired outcome; and finally, the continuous retesting of these generalisations (French and Bell, 1984; Carr and Kemmis, 1986). This Institute-based project is now well advanced and it was still continuing at the time of writing.

1.4 Significance of the case study

The case study is significant in terms of VET research in that it hopefully provides a contribution to the research needs of VET. Anderson and Scott (1996) have recently described how research can be used to assist in policy implementation but other previous studies have found that the links between research, policy and practice were weak (McDonald, Hayton, Gonczi and Hager, 1993). The need to link research into policy formulation and implementation has also been identified by Ramsey (1992) and McGaw (1996). The case study is part of the current project designed to provide advice as to the impact of research in VET in relation to policy and planning, practice and performance (Selby Smith, 1997).

2. COMMENTS ON DECISION MAKING WITHIN TAFE NSW AND THE SYDNEY INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY IN 1993.

This case study commences in 1993. At that time single Institutes in TAFE NSW had just been formed following the abolition of the TAFE NSW Network structure. This Network structure, established in 1990, had previously consisted of networks of TAFE Colleges located in various geographical regions of NSW. The new structure consisted of eight Institutes of TAFE and three Institutes of Technology. These Institutes had little autonomy and were still in a state of transition from one structure to another. Policy decisions involving recruitment and resource allocation were still made within a highly centralised bureaucracy, commonly referred to at the time as 'Head Office'.

Prior to the introduction of the Network structure, the TAFE NSW system had consisted of individual TAFE Colleges, each managed by a College principal. The traditional approach by these College principals had been to encourage growth by increasing student numbers and then seek resources to cover this growth. These resources were inevitably granted and Principals managed on the premise that growth at an individual College level would result in increases in funding from the central bureaucracy. Unfortunately this growth was to a certain extent unplanned and there was much duplication in the increase of certain VET courses at Colleges within close proximity to each other. The move to an Institute-based structure was intended to change the emphasis of locational considerations of growth to one where the emphasis was on vocational-related outcomes (Jones, 1992).

The process of resource allocation in 1993 was that TAFE NSW received an annual budget from the NSW State Government, as had been the case in previous years. The TAFE NSW Budget Review Group then proposed that, commencing in 1994, RAM would be used to make centralised decisions on what resources each Institute would receive in order to deliver State-funded programs. Although the model was in an early stage of development, a small group of managers realised that, should this be the case, then the potential impact on the activities of Sydney Institute of Technology could be significant. The clear message was that the ability of Sydney Institute to make decisions on what VET programs it wanted to deliver would, from now on, be dependent on the resources made available to the Institute. The Resource Allocation Model would provide the basis for resource allocation negotiations and decisions between the central level of TAFE NSW and the Institute. Many aspects of decision making at the Institute with regard to course delivery could be removed, especially in those areas where growth had been planned.

It is worthwhile noting once again that Institute managers were faced with this sense of imposition in an organisational culture where growth had previously been assumed to be the natural thing to achieve. Many managers perceived Sydney Institute of Technology to have a monopoly on the provision of many VET programs with unlimited funding. Up to the potential imposition of RAM, managers had had no need to reflect on what was done and how well things were done at the Institute.

3. DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH

This section presents details of the research covered in the case study. The first part comments on research leading to the introduction of RAM and its intended goals, while the second describes the initial response to RAM by the Sydney Institute of Technology.

3.1 The TAFE NSW resource allocation model

In November 1992 the Budget Allocation Bases Review Group of TAFE NSW had indicated that there was a need to identify regional variations in course delivery costs at the various NSW Institutes of Technology and Institutes of TAFE. At the same time the review group indicated the need to develop a suitable model for allocating recurrent expenditure between Institutes. Following extensive research, the Planning and Evaluation Unit of TAFE NSW developed a new approach to the allocation of recurrent resources, incorporating unit cost measures within a relative funding model. This model became known as RAM (TAFE NSW, 1993). The planning characteristics of RAM, as proposed in its early stage of development, are outlined in Table 1. Note that only three of the goals were of direct relevance to the 1994 phase of RAM, with a further two proposed for future development.

Goal 1 proposed that the model examine the cost for TAFE NSW Institutes in the delivery of an SCH for courses classified into ten industry-related areas and also courses that could be grouped into a single classification of general education. This unit cost could then be used to identify the number of SCHs it was possible to deliver within a given budget; identify regional and other variations in costs; and provide data on costs per SCH for each industry area and the general education area. This analysis could then be used to fund educational profiles proposed by each of the TAFE NSW Institutes.

Table 1: Planning characteristics of RAM

Goal	Objective	Measure
1994 Model		
1. Efficiency	Minimise the unit costs of quality outputs	Cost per Student Contact Hour (SCH)
2. Equity	Achieve satisfactory ratios of SCH to population	Participation rates SCH/population
3. Budget	Maximise outcomes within budgetary constraints	Meet budget targets
Future Applications of RAM		
4. Appropriateness	Distribution of total SCH between industry or program areas	SCH/Industry grouping
5. Effectiveness	Cost per effective SCH	\$/graduate SCH

Goal 2 proposed that the fit between Institute student geographical catchment populations and the TAFE NSW VET provisions for these populations be examined. In this examination, RAM proposed that Institute catchment areas could be identified and that the populations in these areas could be adjusted according to various planning scenarios. These adjusted populations could then be weighted according to identified socio-economic indicators and total annual SCHs calculated and compared with proposed Institute profiles.

The third goal of RAM ensured that all other goals in RAM were achieved without exceeding the constraints set by the overall available budget. Goal 3 also assists in determining the total number of SCHs that can be delivered by the TAFE NSW system.

Goals 4 and 5 were targeted for future research and development, and related the provision of TAFE NSW services to the needs of both industry and students. Goal 4, for example, was concerned with industry needs and proposed that industry VET requirements could be measured by using methodologies that involved the use of classifications such as TAFE NSW Industry Specialist Areas, NSW Industry Training Advisory Boards or the Australian Classification of Occupations. Once again the model was to be used to develop a framework that would allow for a comparison of industry needs and the provision of programs in each Institute's profile in terms of SCHs, which were the funding unit. Goal 5 related expenditure to an outcomes measure or dollars per effective SCH. The dollars per effective SCH would be calculated by only including data from students who had completed modules or subjects, and thus provide a measure of effectiveness.

The main results of the research were to base RAM on a comprehensive review of TAFE NSW's existing cost structures. These cost structures were then expressed as dollars per SCH. RAM then used this amount to allocate resources to Institutes based on their volume of SCHs and the specific industry area to which VET programs were aligned. In addition to this, the model also proposed that Institutes should identify their planned activities for the next three to four-year period in terms of planned enrolments and SCHs as part of its 'Institute Profile' (p. 17). Thus an Institute's ability to deliver the programs outlined in the profile would depend on the resources available. RAM would 'both inform an Institute during its profile planning and provide the basis for subsequent resource allocation negotiations and decisions' (p. 17). This was a clear message to Institutes that from now on there would be a more structured approach to planning compared to what had gone before.

In addition, part of the research was aimed at gaining an understanding of the relationship between course commonality at an industry sector level and unit costs. On the evidence obtained, the RAM report suggested that there was sufficient reason to believe that it was valid to compare Institute costs at this level. The concern at Sydney Institute was that, because of its size and complexity, and the fact that it ran many specialised and higher level courses, it was not equitable to compare unit costs at

Sydney with other Institutes. This was disputed by the RAM researchers. Over the past few years this has been the subject of much debate and further research.

3.2 The impact of RAM and management climate on the Sydney Institute of Technology

Before the release of the RAM report there had been little internal research carried out on organisation performance at the Sydney Institute of Technology. Practically no data had been collected on an internal basis and only limited analysis had been carried out on any data that was available. In addition, there had been limited development of information management systems at the Institute level because of the fact that organisational structures had only been operational for a short time. In simple terms there was a lack of an organisational culture that used research, and information obtained through research, as a means of improving the organisation's performance and development. Consequently there was extremely limited information that could be used to legitimately begin to determine the impact that the RAM reports and recommendations would have on Sydney Institute of Technology operations.

In their comments on the nature of organisational inquiry, Argyris and Schon (1996) discuss the term 'inquiry' not in the colloquial sense of scientific investigation, but rather in a more fundamental sense of the 'intertwining of thought and action that proceeds from doubt to the resolution of doubt' (p. 277). They suggest that doubt is triggered by a mismatch between the expected results of an action and the results achieved. Translated to this case study this could mean that the imposition of RAM, and the possibility of changes in the way resources would be allocated, would have been responsible for action by the managers. In other words, when confronted by RAM, some managers, but not all, experienced what Argyris and Schon describe as a 'problematic situation' or a 'surprise' (p. 277). They propose that in such a situation individuals who function as agents of an organisation according to its prevailing roles and rules will then try to resolve any doubt through the establishment of inquiry, and this individual inquiry 'feeds into and helps to shape organisational inquiry which then feeds back to shape the further inquiry carried out by individuals' (p. 278). In all likelihood other factors probably contributed to this response. These may be associated with an awareness of moves towards a different management climate as previously described, but RAM was certainly influential in precipitating their response.

The reaction and response to RAM by managers at the Sydney Institute of Technology is characterised by the various elements of the above description. Once over the initial surprise, their main response was to initiate a relatively small research project with an aim of attempting to determine the costs of delivering teaching programs across the six education faculties, although it needs to be repeated that at the time the project had not been initiated in the sense of an agreed action research project. The main units used in the initial analysis were teaching hours and the costs of goods and services used in the delivery of these programs. In 1993 the project commenced under the name of the Global Budgeting System, or GBS.

At this stage, the project recognised that Faculties needed to consider resource planning at three levels: course, subject and module. Prior to 1993, data collection had been through the use of paper forms but, as previous comments have recognised, analysis had proved to be frustrating, largely because of the size and complexity of the Institute's operations, the wide diversity of VET programs and a failure to approach the problem from a research perspective. In any case funding had never been a problem, and data collection and analysis had previously been seen to be the responsibility of the central bureaucracy.

In 1994 a private consultancy firm was contracted to assist with system design, specifications and programming. Foxpro was chosen as PC platforms at the time did not offer the functionality needed. In the early stages the rate of progress was slow due to budget constraints and limited awareness and support for the project by Faculty staff. The majority of teaching staff was opposed to the concept of budgeting for course delivery. There was a 'cargo cult' mentality that assumed that additional funds would always appear when required. Another factor leading to lack of support was training difficulties for those staff who were prepared to support the concept. By 1995 it had become clear that

the Institute could still not produce internally data that could be used in any comparison to that contained in the RAM analysis.

At this point in the case study, a number of critical events occurred. First, the project name was changed to the Global Planning System (GPS), which indicated an emphasis on planning rather than budgeting. Secondly, more funds were made available in order to accelerate implementation. Thirdly, the Institute senior executive staff publicly supported the project. Juran (1988) has put forward the view that leaders must either create conditions for organisational change or take advantage of external threats to get their message across. From here on, the emphasis of the project became more associated with the need to develop GPS as a management and planning tool that would provide measures of budget inputs to the Institute and also the outputs that could be achieved. There was now a realisation that the expectation of the NSW Government was that TAFE NSW, and the Institutes, would be more accountable and efficient in the use of resources. RAM, which had precipitated the early response, became co-incidental. This appreciation of a changing management environment was instrumental in keeping the GPS project alive and increasing the level of importance it had to Institute policy and planning. Three additional administrative staff were made available to the project and eventually the GPS team were able to collect and consolidate information using units of a teaching hour for individual teaching sections within the six faculties. The next stage of development was to provide reports that gave information on the total teaching hours that teaching sections planned to use in future programs and provide comparisons to what teaching hours had been used in previous semesters. The detail, available at the Institute, faculty and teaching section levels, was now at a stage where relatively accurate outcomes could be predicted of any resources allocated. This was a significant improvement in terms of information that was available for decision making. In addition, at the Institute level, the ability to make comparisons between teaching hours planned and how these related to teaching hours available through allocated budgets led to small changes in organisational culture and staff behaviour. Teaching sections began to realise that budget allocations were finite, accountability was required, planning for the future was essential and that there was no guarantee that previous levels of funding would be maintained.

In 1996 the GPS team was further increased, with each Faculty providing a project officer trained to provide standardised information into GPS that could not only be used for budget planning purposes, but also for providing Institute profile data that reported on planned activities for the next three years in terms of course offerings by Faculty and teaching section, teaching hours required and actual student teaching hours produced. Later in 1996 a GPS User Committee was established and a number of additional GPS enhancements, new reports and features were specified and then developed. Reports were available that could provide information on previous, current and planned teaching activities. Increased training was made available and many individual teaching sections elected to take ownership and responsibility for the GPS data requirements at their level in the organisation.

At the beginning of 1997 more improvements continued to be implemented, particularly in terms of user friendliness and the possibility of connecting GPS to other information management systems at the Institute. Important here are initiatives that will attempt to link salary and other financial costs to the delivery of teaching programs. The aim here is to have details of both the actual financial costs and teaching hours involved in the delivery of teaching programs. Table 2 illustrates the main course delivery planning strategy for the seven faculties for the financial year 1997-98 with the emphasis on teaching hours allocated and the target annual student contact hours (ASCH) for each Faculty. While this table may appear simplistic, it should be noted that the current version of GPS allows for forty-two variables to be measured for each course planned, and for sixteen variables to be measured for each subject within individual courses. Examples of these include such variables as student enrolment status, name of course, subject or module, number of groups, time of attendance, length of course, teaching hours per week and per semester.

Table 2: State contract for financial year 1997 - 1998

	TCH Target	EFTS Target	ASCH Target	TCH Target	EFTS Target	ASCH Target	TCH Target	EFTS Target	ASCH Target
	<i>S2/97</i>	<i>S2/97</i>	<i>S2/97</i>	<i>S1/96</i>	<i>S1/96</i>	<i>S1/96</i>	<i>1997/96</i>	<i>1997/96</i>	<i>1997/96</i>
Aboriginal Studies	3 600	56	40 081	3 300	77	55 170	7 532	132	9 251
Arts & Media/Tourism & Hospitality	68 400	1 376	990 866	61 300	1 256	904 260	141 572	2 632	1 895 126
Building & Construction/Rural & Mining	52 000	1 107	797 298	46 600	989	712 185	107 625	2 097	1 509 483
Business Studies/Information Technology	73 000	2 079	1 497 066	65 300	1 850	1 332 341	150 959	3 930	2 829 407
Engineering Services/Transport	61 000	1 900	1 368 257	55 000	1 829	1 317 016	126 618	3 730	2 685 272
General Education & Access	82 000	886	637 839	73 500	1 023	736 705	169 733	1 909	1 374 544
Personal & Community Services/Manufacturing	67 000	1 201	864 729	60 000	1 096	789 046	138 625	2 297	1 653 775
Totals:	407 000	8 519	6 133 892	365 000	8 156	5 872 108	842 662	16 675	12 006 000

Note: TCH = teaching contact hours
EFTS = equivalent full-time students
ASCH = annual student contact hours

3.3 Decision making now

The case study now turns to a brief examination of the relationships between the research described previously and the current level of decision making at the levels of the TAFE NSW Budget Review Group and the Sydney Institute of Technology.

There is difficulty in determining how RAM is now influencing the way in which NSW State funds are allocated to Institutes. Different pictures emerge depending upon whose views are sought. A general theme that emerges is that the RAM concept, and the information provided by RAM, is an influence on the way in which the Budget Review Group considers its deliberations. Other factors, including political issues of the time, geographical location, traditional levels of funding to Institutes and the influences of various individuals also come into the process. What is clear is that the original goal of RAM, one where there is a direct link between inputs as provided in terms of budgets and outputs as determined by actual SCHs, is the basis of negotiations. Table 2, for example, illustrates the 1997-98 contractual agreement between Sydney Institute and the Budget Review Group for an agreed target of 21,006,000 SCHs from the allocation of 842,662 teaching delivery hours. Allocation of resources to individual Faculties is by decision making at the Institute level, not the Budget Review group.

At the Institute level the GPS project has had a major influence on planning and decision making. Naturally, there are other competing factors in deciding what gets done, but GPS plays an important role. In the early stages of the project there were very loose connections between the operations of the Institute and the project. In 1997 there is now an acceptance by most Head Teachers, Heads of Study and Faculty Directors that GPS is a major tool in determining what courses individual Faculties offer. Data is now available at the course module level, whereas up to 1995 it was only available at the course level. There is transparency in the sense that GPS data is freely available to staff at all levels. Faculty business plans now have elements that relate to GPS and if State funding is increased or reduced then the impact can be immediately ascertained and appropriate decisions made. Planning cycles have been introduced and detailed retrospective and current program analysis is available as well as strategic planning considerations.

4. WHAT WAS LEARNED?

The claim is made that most managers learn from experience and that learning from experience can assist managers in making more effective use of both unplanned and planned experiences (Mumford, 1994). Looking back, what can be learnt from this case study?

This question is addressed in the final section of the case study by reviewing developments over the time frame of 1993 to the present. Comments are provided on the barriers and difficulties experienced during the time frame of the study, and also on the research processes that have been identified. A fourth aspect of the section is a discussion on how improvements could be made in the application of similar research in the future.

From a retrospective viewpoint there is little that can be said about the research leading to the introduction of RAM. The research was, and still is, very comprehensive with significant resource input. Sydney Institute of Technology, and other TAFE NSW Institutes, had, and still have, the opportunity to comment in the initial stages, but how influential these comments were is open to debate. The Budget Review Group has not implemented the grand vision of RAM in terms of its original five goals. Only goal 1, and to an extent goal 3, of the original model have been influential, but they have not been implemented as a policy framework. Despite the fact that research continues on the RAM concept, there is difficulty in determining what level of influence RAM has on resource allocation. Why this is so is difficult to determine and depends on whose views are sought. On the one hand there are views that RAM has been a major influence on how decisions involving resources are made. On the other hand, there are views that it is management climate that is driving decision making involving resource allocation and Institute performance. Despite these diverse viewpoints the evidence would suggest that the original concept of RAM is still significant in the way decisions and evaluations involving resources are made.

Much more can be said with regard to the implementation of the GPS project. At the beginning of the project the major weakness of Sydney Institute of Technology was that there was not a strong culture of research that would allow a structured and systematic response to RAM and its implications. There was a climate of poor collaboration and communication between those involved in the project and teaching sections, resulting in a sense of non-ownership among some sections of staff. For a time, there was still a perception that 'it would not happen' and consequently a reluctance of staff to get involved. Many Head Teachers simply viewed the project as resulting in more work for them.

Gradually, however, and especially after 1995, these difficulties began to disappear. The project began to take on characteristics of research. There was now a group of staff with specific skills and knowledge relevant to GPS and the questions the project set out to answer. Most teaching sections were familiar with GPS information reports and could review and reflect on the evidence made available. Staff began to realise that there had to be an Institute-driven process that would allow them to make decisions at the Institute level. Questions of survival were raised by some teaching sections and this hip-pocket reaction clearly influenced the conversion of their attitude to GPS.

What is also interesting from a Sydney Institute of Technology perspective is the fact that, notwithstanding RAM, GPS was the result of a political and management climate where there were economic demands for change. These demands were from an environment external to Sydney Institute of Technology. One consequence of this is that the Institute has not only been able to meet these external demands, but has also changed how it acts internally. These changes are characterised by the development of new competencies, skills and knowledge and a different attitude to the use of research (Donegan, 1990). When analysed over the period 1995 to date, the response of the Sydney Institute of Technology does begin to align to the action research model proposed by French and Bell (1984) and Carr and Kemmis (1986). The essential cyclical elements of this model are: the realisation that there is a problem; a diagnosis of the problem; collection and analysis of relevant data; action planning and the determination of research objectives; implementation of results and introduction of new organisational behaviour; and then a repetition of this whole circle of activities.

What other lessons can be drawn from the experiences described in this case study? First, it seems safe to assume that, despite moves towards autonomy by individual Institutes, as long as they remain part of the NSW public sector of VET it is inevitable that they will continue to be under the umbrella of policy decisions made either at a federal level or State level of government. Secondly, like RAM, many of these policies will be the result of a significant research effort involving the investment of considerable financial and human resources into the research process. In this regard Institutes need to be able to respond to the impact of such decisions.

A major thrust of this case study is that in order to meet these requirements and continually improve its organisational performance, the Sydney Institute of Technology needs to continue to build on the research base that has been established. There is a need to continue to foster a culture of understanding the nature and consequences of research, particularly action research. This continuity can be achieved through further development of a commitment to learning about, and understanding the impact of, actions or 'surprise' decisions (Argyris and Schon, 1996, p. 277), such as RAM. In addition, the managers at the Institute need to understand the effects of their own strategic actions and how these actions can be put into practice. The action research approach would appear to be one way in which the Institute can learn to assess and respond to the imposition of policy decisions. Obviously there are other research methodology options, but it is not the intention of this case study to address that issue. The main point is that research is used as the vehicle to respond to the impact of management and policy decisions, especially those from the external environment. In addition, this research environment needs to be one that breaks down barriers and encourages integration in the workplace (Field, 1995). If Sydney Institute of Technology had had this culture of research, the GPS project would have been much more effective and achievable in a shorter time frame. A positive outcome from the project, however, is that the experience has moved the Institute towards this culture.

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DECISION MAKING AND 'CAPACITY BUILDING' IN VICTORIAN ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROVIDERS: THE *FORGING PATHWAYS* LEARNING PACKAGE

Peter Rushbrook and Allie Clemans¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study provides an opportunity for the authors to reflect on a project conducted in 1997 for the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE) and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board (ACFEB). The project brief was to investigate the nature of pathways in Adult and Community Education (ACE) and prepare a learning package for ACE providers that facilitated greater management and educator understanding of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways available to ACE clients. The initial project research generated data that revealed greater ACE-VET pathway complexity than anticipated by OTFE/ACFEB, but which were well known to ACE providers. The data were represented in the learning package through reproducing the research respondents' voices as edited text. Our rationale was that this mode of 'Speaking Back' offered greater informational 'authenticity' to participants who would ultimately make use of the package. Consequently, we believed, participants would be more likely to develop 'capacity-building' strategies to meld existing ACE practice with the novelty of VET provision. The case study details the unfolding of the project with particular attention given to the role of research in facilitating practitioner decision making.

1. THE CONTEXT

The case study is a reflective description and analysis of a project conducted in 1997 by the Monash University Adult and Vocational Education and Training (AVET) Institute for the Quality and Change Management Division of the Victorian Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE), and ACFEB. The title of the project was *Forging Pathways: Good Practice in Community-based Education* (Clemans and Rushbrook, 1997; Clemans and Rushbrook, 1998). Responding to identified OTFE/ACFE strategic plan priorities, the authors made extensive use of ACFE practitioner case studies to construct a learning package that facilitated and encouraged cross-sectoral (ACE/TAFE/private provider) cooperation and promoted the lifelong learning opportunities available through the incorporation and extension of VET programs into the wide range of ACE programs already on offer.

1.1 Background

The *Forging Pathways* project was perhaps uniquely Victorian because of an institutionally embedded tradition of separate and culturally distinct ACE and VET provision. While ACE has always formed part of Victorian vocational education, there has been since the mid-nineteenth century a number of enduring institutional arrangements that offered stand-alone ACE programs, usually short-term and non-credentialled. An understanding of this culture of separation offers an explanation for the origin of the project.

ACE and technical and further education (TAFE) in Victoria were born of the same parent: the Mechanics Institute. Australia's first technical colleges, for example, were established at Ballarat (1870) and Bendigo (1871) after active lobbying by local institutes. In spite of their impressive titles as 'schools of mines', they in effect provided substantial general adult education and quickly earned the label 'poor men's grammar schools'. After the decline of Mechanics Institutes in the late 1880s and the 1890s depression-induced scarification of technical college-based adult education courses, technical education and adult education went their separate ways.

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To continue the parenting image, technical education and adult education became brother and sister respectively, each deeply gendered by life's circumstances. Technical education catered to an almost exclusively male audience and chose formal credentialism and strong linkages with industry as its path to success, while adult education retreated to the university and offered non-credentialled 'self-improvement' classes to groups dominated largely by women (but managed and taught by men). Technical education, because of its formal vocational programs and attempts to win industrial legitimacy, sought and received a higher public profile and was consequently subjected to greater accountability, particularly during times when it was regarded as the fount of national skills development. Quickly entrenched as traditions relating to the maintenance of sectoral identity and the search for private sector legitimacy, these characteristics gave the sector a tendency toward conservatism. Through reaction to circumstances dictated by bureaucracy and industry it tended to follow rather than lead (Rushbrook, 1995, pp. 116-184; Rushbrook, 1997).

Adult education, however, felt under no such obligation to chase the status quo. It had not bought into any form of credentialism and had developed a powerful ethos of voluntarism and 'bottom-up' development, engendering traditions of independence and innovation. After WWII, for example, it chose to totally reinvent itself following a decline in support for university extension classes and their coordinating authority, the Workers Education Association (WEA). Under the charismatic leadership of Colin Badger, who made brilliant use of a briefly lived Labor administration, a fledgling Council of Adult Education (CAE) rose from the acrimonious dispute which saw the extinction of the WEA. From the late 1940s the CAE became a world leader in adult education innovation, establishing such imaginative projects as the arts train, book discussion groups, travelling theatre, prison education and summer schools. Practising its philosophy of support through devolution, the CAE encouraged the establishment of a range of independent rural and urban based community education centres (Badger, 1984; Rushbrook, 1992-93). This was followed by an expanding network of neighbourhood houses and migrant education centres (Macrae, 1991). It was only from the mid-1970s that the sector became subject to the external pressures of credentialism with the introduction of adult Year 12 programs.

While for most of the century vocational and adult education co-existed as distant siblings, from 1974 they came into closer contact after the publication of the Kangan Report which combined together vocational and adult education under the title 'Technical and Further Education' (Kangan, 1974, p. xvii; Rushbrook and Mackinnon, 1998). This new and federal definition of TAFE offered both vocational and adult education much-needed funding, and with it an increasing obligation to meet national TAFE priorities. Victoria's vocational education sector claimed ownership of the sector, but acknowledged that TAFE was bigger than its boundaries. So began many rounds of spats between brother and sister, the former claiming rights of primogeniture over the latter. The spats were soothed through intra-sectoral committee memberships but never entirely resolved. From 1987, after the publication of the Edgar Report, the sometimes acrimonious situation was resolved with a trial sibling divorce and cemented from 1991 with the passage of enabling legislation. Both agreed to live and work together under the OTFE banner, in spite of the underpinning differences (Edgar, 1987; Rushbrook, 1995, pp. 242-325).

The 1990s, therefore, presented 'dangerous opportunities' for the ACFE sector. While providing an increased public profile and increased funding for work-related credentials, the sector had to contend with an increase in 'top-down' management and curriculum (for example, Competency Based Training) policies (Rushbrook, 1996). While demographic research suggested that an increasing number of students selected adult education providers for the acquisition of vocationally relevant skills and credentials, there remained its time-honoured audience who sought self-improvement through a huge range of non-credentialled programs (Peters, 1994).

This diversification of audiences and the new bureaucratic environment created a watershed in the ACE sector. It had reached a moment where it was required to debate its future — how (but not whether) to embrace the realities of the VET agenda. It was during this period that the *Forging Pathways* project was conceived: a learning package to explore the intersection of conflicting cultures but weighted to the inclusion of VET.

1.2 The organisations

The *Forging Pathways* project brought together the resources of three separate bodies:

- The Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE)
- The Adult, Community and Further Education Board (ACFEB); and
- The Adult and Vocational Education and Training Institute (AVET), Faculty of Education, Monash University.

Office of Training and Further Education. OTFE operates within the Ministry of Education and is the State's primary purchaser of VET programs. OTFE is the most recent embodiment of the TAFE tradition. During the 1990s OTFE, as the bureaucratic mouthpiece of the State Training Board (STB) and the overall State Training System (STS), has moved from a primary association with government-sponsored TAFE institutes to 'fund whoever will provide best for the public interest' (State Training Board, 1994, p. 21). In addition to TAFE institutes, OTFE-funded organisations now include private providers and enterprises, secondary schools, community centres and universities. To emphasise its enlarged focus, OTFE summarises its eclectic approach through five strategic directions:

- from TAFE to VET
- from supply to demand driven
- from activity to outcome achievement
- from quantity to quality outcomes
- from central control to devolved outcomes (State Training Board, 1994, p. 20).

These directions are represented in the STB's mission statement of:

Building a world class vocational education and training system to produce a skilled and empowered community to:

1. support the competitiveness of Victorian industry and business; and
2. enhance the social and economic opportunities of Victorians (State Training Board, 1994, p. 19).

The Adult, Community and Further Education Board. ACFEB operates as a separate office within OTFE and is the carrier of Victoria's adult education tradition. The Board's mission statement captures this tradition as:

Ensuring the provision of adult, community and further education to give Victorian adults the opportunity to participate in life long learning which contributes to their social, economic and cultural development as individuals and members of the community (ACFEB, 1995, p. 5).

Billet et al. (1997) note that the 'statements of direction...emphasise different aspects of securing the [OTFE] mission statement, with the economic goals being realised largely through the VET system, and the social and personal goals through the ACFE system' (p. 17).

The Adult and Vocational Education and Training Institute. The AVET Institute was established in 1995 and operates within the Faculty of Education at Monash University. The Institute has both teaching and research functions. It works closely with the Faculty's Professional Development Institute in teaching the post-graduate Certificate in Adult Teaching and Learning and has recently developed an undergraduate degree, the Bachelor of Adult Learning and Development. It also manages programs at masters and doctoral levels. Research funding has been actively sought and projects have been funded through large and small Australian Research Council (ARC) grants and public tendering. The Institute's functions currently are undergoing change through a Faculty restructure.

1.3 The research

Context. The *Forging Pathways* project was won by the AVET Institute through a tender advertised jointly by OTFE and ACFEB. The process involved, first, a written submission detailing the proposed research rationale and methodology, possible outcomes and detailed costings; and second, following short-listing, an interview with representatives from OTFE and ACFEB. The authors believe they were awarded the project because of their extensive experience in the ACE sector and excellent record in research and project management. These combined skills were drawn on to complete the project within a three-month timeframe on a relatively small budget.

Methodology. Recent research into the connections between VET provision and the ACE sector by writers such as McIntyre (McIntyre et al., 1995; McIntyre, 1998), reveals a richness of detail enabled through qualitative research techniques. The authors, too, believed that given the constraints of time and budget, a qualitative approach using case studies would yield the depth of data required to produce a viable learning package. It was deemed important to start with the 'lived world experiences' of ACE providers as a point of entry into the issue of pathways. This method sought to establish quickly the validation and authentication of the research data by the readers as a basis for exploring strategies to enhance pathways.

The authors aimed to identify the factors that facilitated ACE to VET pathways in ACE providers. The defined task was to develop a set of ACE provider case studies grounded in the work of a given sample of sites considered by regional councils as demonstrating practices which reflected diversity in ACE-VET provision. Five sites were selected from the list given, which reflected small, medium and large provision in rural, urban, and suburban locations. Interviews were subsequently conducted with provider managers or coordinators. Their experiences, transcribed in their own words, provided a useful and realistic starting point for raising issues and offering perspectives on pathways: why they had been forged; the benefits they offered; the type of arrangements that existed to implement them; and the risks and drawbacks they posed.

The garnered data formed the basis for the production of a professional development package. This package was presented in draft form at a number of regional workshops and now exists as a stand-alone resource to assist all ACE providers to develop pathways in the current VET context. The authors used a 'Speaking Back' approach in presenting much of the material verbatim as written text under the following headings:

- mission statement
- our organisation: when we started; what we do; the communities we support
- why we forged pathways
- our pathways arrangements
- the importance of networks in forging pathways
- the benefits and drawbacks of forging pathways
- have we lost our community focus?
- our advice to providers forging pathways.

The case studies were followed by the 'Pathways Planning Strategy' designed to 'flesh-out' the issues raised. The strategy had three sections:

- an external scan (needs gaps, industry and community opportunities, funding opportunities, the impact of national and State policies)
- an internal scan (plotting internal pathways, analysis of existing and potential pathways)
- the benefits and drawbacks in forging pathways.

Participants were encouraged to discuss the issues in their own organisational context and culture. Space for recording their responses was made in the package. An appendix provided information on training packages and a workshop evaluation sheet (Clemans and Rushbrook, 1998).

On reflection the authors felt that the material presented in this way enabled a more 'authentic' learning experience for workshop participants. The authors drew inspiration from writers such as

Billet (1994) and assumed that participants would play an active role in the construction and mediation of meaning drawn from the workshop context and outcomes. To facilitate and optimise this process, the verbatim reporting strategy, we believed, provided a recapitulation of authentic workplace experiences devoid of the sometimes alienating language of academic analysis. This immediacy encouraged identification with the issues and greater self-directed exploration of key issues related to ACE-VET pathways. Like Billett, we believed that individuals 'do not simply *internalise* externally-generated knowledge, but seek viability with existing socio-culturally derived knowledge and understanding' (Billett, 1994, p. 63).

From these assumptions we believed that workshop participants should be encouraged to become active in shaping their organisations' futures. This 'capacity-building' outcome was developed after consideration of warnings from Connell (1995) that, during times of increasingly centralised curriculum-making and organisational management, educators are in danger of losing their 'capacities for social practice'. Like Connell, we believe 'the capacity to operate as designers and producers of knowledge is important to the vitality of education' (p. 110). If denied the capacity to reflect, strategically think and act, we felt the independence of community providers would be compromised. Our encouragement of capacity building, therefore, was seen as an essential skill for informed decision making.

1.4 Significance

The research was significant because of its timeliness in the emerging debate over the shifting role of community providers. From a strong tradition of meeting the 'bottom-up' needs of local communities, sites were asked to extend their range of program provision through offering VET programs. Of concern were the possible effects of credentialled and centrally prescribed and managed programs on a community-based structure marked by a fierce independence and relatively free of the constraints of the new managerialism. Provider reactions from open hostility to rejection were anticipated, but were almost absent. Rather, providers identified the research as highlighting the challenges flowing from identification of new opportunities. The success of the methodology in representing perspectives on pathways from the standpoint of those within the ACE sector itself was seen as a major factor contributing to the positive reactions to the research. Provider reaction varied from the challenge of new opportunities to open hostility and rejection. In a climate that encouraged greater program diversity and organisational self-sufficiency, the *Forging Pathways* research provided informed grist for the ACE-VET pathways mill. It offered evidence that tested out informal assumptions and turned on their head traditional views held within and of the sector. The extent of the ACE-VET pathways already established within ACE providers themselves was surprising.

2. THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATION AND ITS PROCESSES

2.1 Overview

The learning package was developed as a partnership between OTFE, ACFEB and the AVET Institute. An ACE-VET Project Reference Group monitored the project's progress. It consisted of six people: one OTFE officer (chair), two ACFE officers and three representatives from community providers and peak bodies. The reference group met twice during the project's data-gathering phase. The researchers met with the group on both occasions. The group represented some of the divergent and strongly held traditions and cultures of the ACE sector, and so provided a good ground on which to 'test' the findings and the effectiveness of the learning package.

2.2 Decision making

The reference group provided guidance rather than direction. One of its first tasks was to supply a list of possible research sites from which five were chosen by the researchers. Tension arose only when the OTFE officer indicated a preference for at least some use of quantitative research methods. However, this soon dissipated after the ACFE representatives strongly supported the proposed case study approach. The expressed differences, we believed, were an extension of differing cultures and traditions within the OTFE and ACFE divisions.

2.3 Research culture

At the time of research both OTFE and ACFEB had recently published statements of what they meant by research. OTFE's *Vocational Education and Training Research Strategy 1995-1997* (1995) stated that research 'is a key component in determining that...training has relevance, and that growth in lifelong education is focussed and productive. Research will enable us to test the appropriateness of policy, educational theory development and program delivery' (p. 5). The strategy also suggested that research may provide 'a foundation for critical debate and testing of assumptions' (p. 7). The May 1996 *ACFEB Research Strategy 1996-1998*, while repeating aspects of the OTFE strategy, left open the possibility of broader, sceptical contributions to the research effort. For example, in the foreword, ACFEB Chair David Neilson stated:

Good ACFEB research will test cherished beliefs and assumptions. It will press past cliches into new knowledge and understanding about adult learning. It will also more accurately and more adequately document aspects of practice which are valuable and should be retained. More often than not, knowledge gained from research will uncover complexities for which there will be no simple policy solutions (p. 3).

In later sections the strategy suggested the application of a range of qualitative, participatory and quantitative methodologies as strategies of intervention, contestation and, where appropriate, support of policy initiatives (ACFEB, p. 12).

At the time of publication, however, both statements could only be claimed as rhetoric as the organisations had yet to embed a strong research culture. The *Forging Pathways* project raised issues that tested the strategies' good intentions.

3. RELEVANT RESEARCH

3.1 Research overview and outcomes

The project research, though intended initially as a data-gathering exercise for the development of the *Forging Pathways* learning package, produced the unintended consequence of challenging several assumptions held by the central bureaucracies and some providers. The following is a brief description of the project's findings.

A first assumption the research challenged was that ACE providers should seek to offer pathways to VET programs in TAFE institutes as a means to complement the learning acquired through ACE provision. This perception generates the notion of pathways as an external journey only, from an ACE provider to TAFE.

Our research found that providers in fact created a series of internal and external pathways that demonstrated an advanced level of provision. Some providers had worked with their local TAFE institute to construct pathways. The institute provided the accredited 'next step' for their students, creating an external pathway. In other instances, the TAFE institute supported the ACE provider to offer an accredited module of a larger VET program within the centre. As the ACE provider became more experienced it applied for approval to deliver modules in its own right as a Registered Training Organisation. Reliance on the TAFE institute then diminished as the providers re-asserted their independence and constructed ACE-VET pathways in their own ACE setting. In some cases, ACE providers even went so far as offering VET programs on an outreach basis to other ACE providers. Their maturity as VET providers, therefore, not only produced ACE-VET pathways, but also an ability to determine the location of the delivery of those pathways. It began externally, but developed internally over time.

The research reinforced the ACE provider view that learners who choose to pursue community-based adult education see this overall environment as conducive to effective learning, rather than associating it with particular programs (for example, ACE with general adult education and TAFE with

vocationally specific programs). Providers saw VET provision as yet another means of responding to their local communities.

A second assumption the project challenged was that ACE-VET pathways, where they existed, were linear. All case study providers, large and small, offered opportunities for ACE and VET through which clients were able to weave an educational program. Participants slipped in and out of courses, rather than pursuing an ACE-VET linear path. More often than not, participants worked internal pathways from non-accredited programs or workshops to accredited programs before moving to external provision. Participants demonstrated a preference for remaining within a community provider because of its intimacy, quality of provision (in particular, child care) and proximity to home.

A third assumption examined was that pathways to VET threaten the community provider ethos, a cherished sectoral tradition. The issue was raised throughout the project and generated a range of responses. Before entering into VET provision, some providers perceived that the availability of accredited VET programs would weaken traditional community generation of 'bottom-up' program ownership.

In practice, however, VET programs tended to become an extension of traditional community practice. Providers were adamant that they were not becoming 'just another TAFE provider' or mini TAFE institute. Indeed, in many cases providers reported that VET strengthened the community ethos through increased financial autonomy and enhanced standing within local communities. Other providers saw VET provision simply as an opportunity, with few or no potential threats, and offered VET programs with great and continuing success. Hearsay evidence about some providers avoiding VET provision suggested the existence of a belief among them of permanent damage to community provision should VET programs be introduced.

Though difficult to draw comparisons from project providers, some parallels were evident. Collectively they shared a commitment to the provision of a wide range of pathways, both internal and external. This led them to seek connections between community-based and formally credentialled VET programs, while maintaining a strong community focus. In various ways they made use of local TAFE institutes as mentors and facilitators in order to familiarise themselves with the management and delivery of VET programs. After gaining confidence, familiarity and legitimacy, they moved on to offer VET programs as stand-alone providers.

The case study providers also had in common the crafting of strong community networks that enabled educationally productive links between employers, client groups, other providers and funding sources. Mostly informal and established through personal contacts and movement within community and business groups, the networks were powerful mechanisms for both responding to, and creating demand for, vocational programs. Finally, the project revealed that the providers' management and staff are risk-takers who look 'outside the square' for solutions to problems relating to program provision. Collectively the case study providers were exemplars of community education leadership, innovation, creativity and entrepreneurial flair.

3.2 Effects of the research on organisational decision making and practice

Given the specific purpose, limited timeline and fixed budget of the *Forging Pathways* project, an opportunity for a formal evaluation of its impact has not been possible. However, in spite of these research impediments, the authors have undertaken an informal project evaluation through conversations with OTFE and ACFE officers and community provider educators and managers.

At the time of writing the learning package had been in circulation within the ACFE sector for about eighteen months. It is in wide use as a primer for debate about issues related to ACE-VET pathways and appears to have been well received. More broadly, by giving voice and legitimacy to felt but not often expressed issues it has achieved a wider purpose of canvassing issues central to shaping the future of Victorian adult education. Our approach of being non-judgmental about the merits of ACE-VET pathways was also appreciated. It appears, therefore, that the package has contributed significantly to an increase in community providers' capacities to make informed decisions in a time of significant structural change.

As with most research, unintended consequences often arise. Our research was no exception. A recent conversation with an OTFE officer revealed that our research has been used within the bureaucracy as evidence justifying the existence of a separate ACE sector. The strong case study feedback that clients came to the sector because of its community focus, as well as its programs, pointed to the unique positioning of providers in the adult and VET marketplace. In addition, the revealed level of sophistication in VET program provision and management—particularly in the areas of fund-raising, creative pathways arrangements and self-directed entrepreneurial activity—reinforced the sector's claim of viability and sustainability in tough economic times.

4. CONCLUSION

The authors and contracting authorities regard the *Forging Pathways* project as highly successful. The project achieved its objectives of researching good practice in community provision of ACE-VET pathways and constructing an effective learning package that encouraged informed provider debate, decision making and 'capacity building'.

At the heart of the project's success was its 'Speaking Back' methodology. It allowed the researchers to validate the research contributions that emerge from the lived worlds of practitioners and test conventional assumptions about movement from ACE to TAFE-based VET programs. It also garnered immediate support from providers because of the 'authentic' nature of the represented voices.

Importantly, the methodology highlights the way in which research can be framed as a platform from which to reflect on the possibilities for decisional action within the context of individual ACE provider cultures. The re-discovery and reinforcement of traditional sectoral differences contributed to the richness of ensuing debates and added to the available evidence supporting the continuance of the ACE sector's unique contribution to adult and VET provision.

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ENTERPRISE-BASED RESEARCH IN SEVENTEEN VET PROVIDERS

Terri Seddon and Allie Clemans¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study documents patterns of enterprise-based research and its impact in seventeen vocational education and training (VET) providers. The study is introduced and contextualised in relation to the recent expansion of research in VET. The main body of the case study is divided into three parts. First, the patterns of research in VET providers are outlined. Second, the articulations between research and operational decision making are profiled and the factors that influence linkages and research impact are documented. On the basis of this analysis, three models of organisational development are described, each resting upon different linkages between research and operational decision making. Finally, barriers to enterprise-based research are documented. The paper concludes by noting the need for organisational and cultural change, as well as skill development, in order to generalise enterprise-based research in VET. It also draws attention to the definitional conundrum posed by the expansion of research in non-academic contexts and the way this challenges socially useful processes for determining what counts as 'useful knowledge'.

1. CONTEXT

1.1 Background

Through the 1980s and 1990s there has been growing interest and support for research in VET. Initially this support took the form of a consolidation of research centres and other formal research capacity (e.g. by establishing links with universities). More recently there has been an expansion of research activity amongst VET providers and practitioners. To some extent these developments formalise pre-existing activities, but they have also been driven by policy reforms, including the availability of funding for research, devolution of decision making to local levels and increased emphasis on evidence-based decision making.

In 1997, the Victorian Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE) funded a consultancy to investigate the extent to which VET providers were using research to inform and advance their goals and operational decision making in the directions established by the State Training Board for reform of the Victorian State Training System (STS) (Seddon and Malley, 1998). The purpose of this investigation was to:

1. assess existing research skills and capacities that enable VET providers to pursue the directions for reform and, on the basis of an empirical investigation, of the research conducted in VET providers;
2. propose a statewide staff development strategy to ensure provider skill levels and capacities to implement reform priorities.

The findings from that consultancy indicated that 'research' was being conducted in VET providers and that it did 'impact' on enterprise-based decision making in ways which enhanced practice and performance, and community relations. Specifically, staff in VET providers engaged in 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge ... and the use of this knowledge to devise new applications' (ABS, 1993). It also encompassed activities at the margins of this formal definition of research, including routine data collection and management and efficiency studies. This activity provided information into decision-making processes, enhanced research skills and attitudes and enabled individual staff development. Very often the outcome of this research was not publication, but a process of questioning that underpinned organisational development.

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This case study dips into the findings of the consultancy to show the impact of research in VET providers. In particular, it reveals the way different enterprises constructed the relationship between research and enterprise goals and operational decision making.

1.2 The organisations

Seventeen VET providers participated in the consultancy. They were selected because they represented a broad range of providers within the STS and because they showed different research needs and capacities. The sample included:

- nine TAFE Institutes - including representative examples of metropolitan and regional; and large, medium and small institutes;
- four community providers - including representative examples of metropolitan and rural; and medium and small community providers;
- four private providers - including representative examples of enterprise-based, industry-based and commercial providers.

1.3 The research

(i) Context

The consultancy required the investigation of the character and extent of information gathering and knowledge-producing activity in VET providers. It focussed on activity that was broadly oriented to furthering enterprise goals in line with OTFE's strategic directions for reform. For the purposes of the study, these activities oriented to enterprise purposes were termed *enterprise-based research*.

Traditionally, enterprise-based research had not been expected in VET providers. Until recently, research in VET did not have a high profile. There was little university research on training (Sweet, 1994), and research in VET remained underdeveloped until the Williams Report (1979) recommended the establishment of a national TAFE research centre, later the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). Until the early 1990s, NCVER remained the lone research centre. It was funded to undertake policy-oriented research which tended to use quantitative methodologies.

This arrangement of research was appropriate for a highly centralised sector that prided itself on its practical orientation to serving industry needs for training (Rushbrook, 1995). Policy research was endorsed as *real* research because it was commissioned and funded, and because its findings informed decision making at the central policy level, at least to some extent. And decisions made at the centre could be disseminated and implemented at the periphery of the centralised system, in the publicly funded TAFE and ACE providers. In this centralised system there was no need for research at the provider level. Indeed, local research at the provider level had the potential to disrupt the smooth implementation of centrally determined policies and practices.

As a result of this history, research in VET came to be associated with the funded production of knowledge conducted by specialist researchers who dealt with abstracted data and complex statistics and endorsed as 'useful knowledge' by governments that fund, support and, to a greater or lesser extent, use such research findings. Yet, that research has not generally been valued by VET practitioners because it has not addressed practitioners' needs for knowledge generated through close involvement within particular contexts. For many people working in VET, 'research' is 'esoteric', 'academic', 'impractical' and generally not useful.

In the 1990s, this institutionalisation of research in VET has changed as a result of four converging trajectories:

The emergence of informational capitalism, in which knowledge is seen as a critical organisational resource which enhances productivity, has created imperatives for workplace reform, innovation and continuous improvement. New management theories have encouraged recognition of workers' contribution to work, and the benefits of shared commitment between workers and managers in the realisation of corporate goals (Davis and Lansbury, 1996). As Peter Drucker (1993) says, 'Knowledge is the only meaningful resource today'. These knowledge resources become available to an organisation

if they are drawn out from workers, workplace cultures and communities. Teamwork, reflection on practice and support for organisational learning are the strategies recommended for producing this knowledge (e.g. Senge, 1994; Watkins and Marsick, 1993). These changes in industry have heightened demand for VET providers to become responsive to both industry and individual clients, and to enhance the productivity of learning. In part this has been addressed by seeing VET providers as organisations that learn.

Public sector reform has accentuated the significance of knowledge as an organisational resource. The move away from a centralised bureaucratic organisation of education and training towards decentralised, independent providers in a training market has reduced the role of the centre in operational decision making and encouraged a new concern with enterprise intelligence. Reduced public funding of education and training requires closer and more strategic targeting of resources to VET provider operations. The development of competitive funding arrangements necessitates strategic enterprise-based responses by autonomous providers operating within the competitive training market. The press for a competitive edge is a crucial driver in both system change and enterprise survival. Policy makers in VET have confirmed the message that training reform requires a new attitude to research. The then Director of OTFE, Peter Harmsworth (1995, p. 1), for instance, noted:

The message on research that has been coming from OTFE for some time now, should be loud and clear. Good research is essential for the vocational education and training sector. Appropriately targeted research will enable the STS to achieve increased learning productivity and competitive edge.

Practitioner research has been revealed and encouraged by these developments. Despite its historical invisibility, practitioners have long engaged in relatively informal processes of producing knowledge to inform their practice. Very often useful knowledge emerged as practitioners went about their day-to-day work, reflecting thoughtfully on what they did and using the understandings that they and their colleagues generated to improve their practice as teachers and administrators. In some cases, this reflection on practice was formalised in contexts outside of their workplaces, through participation in professional activities with VET practitioners working in other workplaces, or with industry-based professional colleagues. It also occurred when VET practitioners undertook coursework and research-based university studies. The knowledge produced through reflection on action was judged in relation to the ethics and norms of these sites in which practitioners talked about and presented their understandings. In workplaces, the knowledge produced through reflection on action was endorsed if it was useful in improving the practices of education and training. In professional contexts, the knowledge produced was judged to be useful if it helped to inform the work of other professionals in the professional community or contribute to debates about good practice. In university programs VET practitioners engaged with academic norms and values.

University conceptions of valid research have broadened over the last thirty years and have endorsed practitioner research in addition to traditional academic and policy-oriented research. This broadening has been a part of wider epistemological debates that have challenged the value-free connotations and hegemony of positivist research (Outhwaite, 1987). Three broad approaches to research are now well accepted. These are:

- Fact finding research which aims to identify and explain empirical patterns in bodies of data often collected through large-scale surveys or ongoing data bases and interrogated using statistical manipulation;
- Praxis research which aims at understanding social phenomena and, in particular, the way meanings are made in various social contexts and how these meanings shape social action. This interpretivist tradition converges with practitioner-based knowledge production through reflection on action and is particularly common in ethnographic research, action research, and action learning; and
- 'Speaking back' research which draws on a range of methodological techniques in order to 'give voice' to minority and/or marginal groups. This research tradition recognises that language is a social practice which contributes to social inequalities, and uses research to enable the disempowered to 'speak back' to the powerful.

These developmental trajectories have encouraged VET providers and individual staff in VET to undertake research. However, in endorsing enterprise-based research, VET policy values and affirms research that is oriented to enterprise purposes, specifically to promoting evidence-based decision making and enhanced learning productivity.

(ii) Methodology

An extensive literature review was conducted in order to clarify the nature of enterprise-based research. This included historical and policy research on research in VET; VET research products (conference proceedings, project reports); literature on workplace knowledge production and workplace learning.

Three main data collection strategies were used:

- Interviews with CEOs - reviewed the research being conducted in each enterprise and explored perceptions of research in the enterprise and its contribution to realising enterprise goals. Interviews were conducted with all seventeen VET enterprises. These interviews were taken to be the primary data source providing an enterprise perspective on enterprise-based research.
- Survey of heads of administrative units within each enterprise sought information on the kind of research the unit was doing, the unit's capacity to do research and the barriers that limited enterprise research. Surveys were returned by staff in eight TAFE Institutes and five non-TAFE providers, which represents a 76 per cent response rate.
- A research strategy planning workshop involving staff (2-3 people) selected by each enterprise - provided data about current and preferred research capacity within the enterprises, while also piloting a staff development strategy aimed at developing an enterprise research strategy plan. In the workshop, staff were asked to focus on an issue of significance to their enterprise and consider: the research tasks required to advance their enterprise operations in relation to this issue; the capacities of the enterprise to conduct these research tasks; and the kinds of supports that would be required to carry out the research. Invitations to attend the workshops were taken up by six TAFE Institutes and three non-TAFE enterprises.

Data were analysed using both descriptive and interpretivist techniques. All three data sources were subject to simple categorisation, frequency counts and profiling. Chief Executive Officers (CEO) interviews were subject to two content analyses focussed on:

- the way CEOs talked about research and its relationships to enterprise operations; and
- CEO perceptions of the factors that influenced the nature and level of research in their enterprise.

Supplementary data and advice were obtained through a review of staff development resources which support research skill development; consultations with relevant peak organisations in VET (e.g. Victorian Association of [TAFE Institute] Directors [VICAD], Australian Council for Private Education and Training [ACPET], Association of TAFE Institutes [ATI]); a stakeholders forum to which participating enterprises, VICAD, ACPET, ATI, Industry Training Boards, OTFE and other interested parties were invited; and advice from the project reference group.

1.4 Significance

The consultancy was significant for three reasons. It broke new ground in:

- investigating practices of knowledge production and their impact in the operational decision making of decentralised VET providers that are now operating in a competitive training market;
- documenting the patterns of enterprise-based research in different kinds of VET providers and their articulation with enterprise goals and operations; and
- beginning to reveal the complex relationships between VET providers, individual VET staff and system-wide priorities in relation to research in VET.

2. THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR PROCESSES

2.1 Overview

The consultancy found evidence of enterprise-based research in all participating VET providers. Specifically,

1. There was participation in formal and informal processes of knowledge production;
2. These enterprise-based processes of knowledge production involved extensive data collection and, in many cases, these data were systematically analysed and actioned so as to inform and advance enterprise activities;
3. There were different patterns of enterprise-based research in TAFE, community and private providers which appeared to be associated with:
 - Features of the enterprise (e.g. history, public or private sector, character of core business, size);
 - Contextual factors (e.g. relative financial security; relationships with other agencies involved in research; character of the relationship between provider and its client base);
 - Attitudinal factors (e.g. perceptions of research; staff attitudes to research); and
 - Methodological effects relating to the distance of the CEO, as the primary data source, from the everyday work of research in VET providers.

Enterprise-based research was widely perceived to have an 'impact' on enterprise goals and operations. This impact was evident in relation to:

1. Enterprise practice and performance by (a) strategically shaping the mission and operations of enterprises; (b) driving enterprise change through staff development, the pooling of productive knowledge, and cultural change; and (c) in some cases, increasing the income, profile and status of the enterprise in ways which increased financial stability and the enterprises' capacity to position themselves advantageously in the training market; and
2. Community relations which enhanced provider-client relationships as a result of consolidating networks and increasing responsiveness to clients.

Despite the growing acceptance of, and engagement in, research in VET enterprises, time, resources, expertise and cultural factors were identified as the major barriers to increasing enterprise-based research.

As a university-based consultant, there were two major challenges. The first was to clarify a conceptualisation of research that would both encompass and sustain enterprise-based research in VET (see Seddon and Malley, 1998). The second challenge was to better understand the relationship between enterprise-based research and enterprise goals and decision making in order to make sensible recommendations about an appropriate statewide staff development strategy. In the final report, the consultancy team argued that enhancing research in VET required more than a stand alone staff development strategy. It also required organisational change at a system and enterprise level to develop pro-research contexts and infrastructure to support staff undertaking enterprise-based research, engaging in relevant skill development and effectively applying research findings in operational decision making.

2.2 Activities

Data collection indicated that all VET providers engaged in some form of enterprise-based research.

(i) *Research topics*

Topics addressed were:

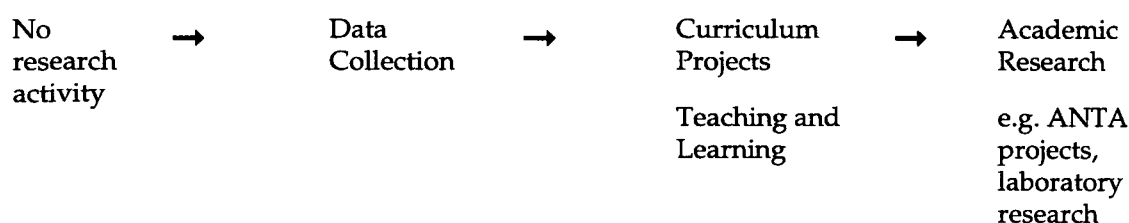
- Policy and its implications for the enterprise;
- Changes in work/industry, workplace learning and their implications for delivery;
- Flexible delivery based on self-paced materials or learning technologies;

- Student needs and satisfaction, including monitoring student outcomes and destinations;
- Effective teaching and learning;
- Participation patterns amongst clients;
- Marketing and promotion;
- Funding opportunities;
- Enterprise policy directions, strategic development and enterprise leadership;
- Enterprise management of staff and resources, administration, health and safety; and
- Information management.

There were no clear relationships between enterprise type (i.e. TAFE Institute, community provider, private provider) and particular focusses of research. However, TAFE Institutes appeared to place more emphasis on information management than community and private providers do. Market research, research on work and industry and related to clients were also significant focusses across providers.

(ii) *Types of enterprise-based research*

Through discussions with CEOs of the VET enterprises in the project sample, it appears that research activity clustered at four points along a continuum. Each point indicates the manner in which research is named and practised within a VET enterprise, corresponding to the increasing existence of firmly based, organisationally well-embedded, research activity:



There appears to be no one place on this continuum where each category of VET enterprise - TAFE Institute, private and community provider - sits. Rather, all these enterprises vary in the level of research activity they have traditionally displayed.

'No research activity'. Those with weaker or fewer traditions of research activity (as stated at interview) are situated between the points of 'no research activity' and 'data collection'. For the most part, CEOs testify to the absence of a research culture or, in some cases, the absence of a research culture supplemented by data collection activity achieved through a range of techniques:

I'd have to say [we have] no tradition of research ...other than the sort of day to day action research that people might do in terms of talking to industry and talking to communities and trying to get feedback through advertising and things like that - pretty hit and miss type of stuff - certainly not a high organisational priority and certainly not the sort of stuff that I'd classify as research ...it's probably an unplanned outcome of other things that we do.
(TAFE F)

'Data collection'. Data collection was a substantial component of the research reported by VET providers. Much of this was related to planning which assumed a central role in VET enterprises, partly as a result of government reporting and accountability requirements in relation to funding. Preparation for such processes relied on the availability of data on which to base negotiations for performance profiles, analysis of the feasibility of new course developments or viability of particular enterprise developments. In all these instances, the data collection and analysis dimensions of planning were acknowledged but described, reluctantly, as research.

So there's a lot of research going on to support the planning in a general context but how rigorous that is being and how it would be classified in a pure sense as research ...? (TAFE C)

However, data collection was not all based on formal data collection techniques. Informal data collection played an important part. One kind of informal data was VET staff experience which provided the basis for reflection in processes of reflective practice. A community provider, for example, highlighted the long tradition of action research amongst teachers, and also noted that action research was facilitated when it was linked with external agencies who could provide other inputs into the process:

materials development is like that ...the materials themselves are trialed, tested, and then they become part of staff development. These are documented formally and then reviewed ...there has been a tradition of action research, again classroom based, looking at issues to do with ... learning, teaching methodologies, getting teachers to look at the impact of what they are doing in the classroom in a systematic way ...We have always done this in partnership with academic people so that there is mix between theoretical underpinnings and practice. (Provider D)

Another significant kind of informal data collection was based on personal connections and networks. These informal networks were used to both gather and source 'industry intelligence':

We have anything up to 200-300 companies represented at the breakfasts around about 5-6 times a year and that's obviously a good opportunity to exchange ideas and exchange developments and directions and so on, so it's an informal way of gathering information ...we develop relationships with industry training boards and we're known to them and we talk to them on a regular basis about developments. (TAFE C)

'Curriculum projects'. A substantial proportion of research activity clustered around national and State projects related to curriculum research and development, and to processes of teaching and learning more generally. One private provider explained this tradition as stemming from its position as an education provider located outside of mainstream educational provision and thus compelled to forge links with academic institutions. These links encouraged a tradition of researching and reflecting on teaching practices:

What we are talking about is our tradition, our history, and I guess we were set up outside mainstream education. So because we were defined as outside mainstream ...we were set up in a slightly different way. Our alliance, in fact, was with [University Centre]. They were the academic hub and we were the practitioners in each of the different States. (Provider H)

Another VET enterprise described substantial staff involvement in curriculum projects, all of which were linked to research:

We've got about 40 people working up in the [R&D] centre at the moment developing national and State curriculum projects, which all have an element of research. (TAFE G)

Some providers (TAFE and community providers) indicated that curriculum projects provided a main site for their research activity because it was more practical and because they felt they lacked credibility in the research game:

We tender more for the development of learning resources and learning strategies and the new training package type stuff than we do for research projects because even in the vocational sector, there is a tendency to award research projects to universities rather than to TAFE because they don't believe TAFE is capable of doing it. (TAFE B)

Here, the traditional culture of VET practitioners conveyed as 'doers' rather than 'thinkers' - harking back to the technical traditions of VET - is used to explain limited opportunities for research. VET enterprises are seen to be less credible or capable of conducting research and this organisational assessment is compounded by the existence of VET practitioners who 'live out' this perception.

'Academic research'. A smaller number of VET enterprises described their research activity as associated with formal academic research projects. Most commonly these projects are funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and there are also providers who have close, research-based, links with industry. One TAFE Institute in the sample ran a research laboratory:

which is unusual in a TAFE Institute. By that I mean applied industry research doing generally small, but often quite significant, applied research activities, always in partnership with consortiums with our industry.
(TAFE I)

(iii) *Patterns of research engagement*

From the CEO interviews it was possible to identify four main orientations in enterprise research engagement:

Research for planning was most common. It involved a wide range of data collection for the purpose of planning in the enterprise, including collection of data on enrolments, client participation, client satisfaction, environmental scanning, general performance measurement and monitoring. This kind of research was partly driven by OTFE's data collection and reporting requirements.

Market research was evident in providers that depend upon good market intelligence to inform their planning. Market research was aimed at monitoring client demand and using that information to continually construct markets for enterprise products amongst existing and new clients. It was based on both formal and informal data collection techniques. Informal approaches depend upon good networking and enterprise promotion, but systematically applied and continuously updated. In larger providers, the demands of systematic and ongoing market research mean that informal networking is integrated into organisational processes and systematic data management. It becomes a subset of research for planning.

Project-based research has expanded as a result of training reform because research services are provided on a consultancy basis. Project-based research includes a wide range of research activity often associated with enterprise or system initiatives, such as the development of curriculum materials, applications of learning technologies, development of competency-based standards, student support services, quality assurance and benchmarking, and policy related issues (e.g. recognition of prior learning). Such project-based research occurred commonly in providers that had associations with higher education - either through institutional partnerships or through staff participation in university studies. Such projects were widely seen as an important form of staff development and, where appropriate financial resources and organisational infrastructure were available, provided a source of income.

Reflective practice included all kinds of staff reflection to enhance and improve day-to-day activity, and was sometimes formalised as action learning, action research or program evaluation. It was mentioned by some CEOs but appears to be a little-acknowledged form of research. When such research was explicitly acknowledged, providers recognised that staff reflective practice made a considerable contribution to enterprise performance.

2.3 Informing decision making

The main areas of enterprise-based research activity indicate that research within VET enterprises commonly related to core business: the need for continuous market expansion, adherence to systemic accountability requirements and the nature and practices of work-related learning.

The following profiles give a sense of the complex relationships that existed between research and operational decision making in different enterprises. These profiles have been selected because they

typify different kinds of articulations between enterprise-based research and enterprise operations. Direct quotes are in italics.

Profile 1: Non-TAFE provider, research not integrated into enterprise operations

Provider A is a small community provider which began as a self-help support group. It has two full-time staff supplemented by sessional tutors. It is closely integrated with the local community and in networks with other providers, local industry and community and welfare agencies. They benefit from some research done by these other agencies - gaining feedback about classes that should be run to support local community needs - but do not do much research themselves.

Research is seen as a largely instrumental activity. They collect a range of data, using the enrolment system, which is returned to adult and community further education for reporting and accountability purposes. *If we are getting funded we have to account for it, and the only way of accounting for it is through the stats ... So we say, if you've given us the money, there's the student contact hours and we've provided this, and this is a record.* They gain feedback on student satisfaction by giving student evaluation forms. *We do have sheets ... but because they are language students, they just copy what the other person does. We might need an interpreter.* They also do random checks where a teacher gets three students to come in and talk to us and see how everything's going. They question the need to write everything down in a formal way. They have just started staff appraisals but wonder whether it is useful for tutors. *The students walk out if the teacher is no good.*

The biggest challenge is their dependence on short-term funding derived from competitive tendering. *We are being asked more and more to write three-year business plans with twelve-month funding.* This has meant a loss of infrastructure. *We've had infrastructure taken away, and we are just creaming a bit off each program.* On top of this there have been huge changes in the workload - *it's just doubled - you are just trying to keep the quality up in the programs you've got at the moment. How do you do the research in order to apply for the funding when you haven't got the resources to do it?*

Informal networking is the key to enterprise operations. It is an important source of information. *We don't need to market ourselves - if we do a good job, they come to us.* It permits resource sharing. *The suburb has a fantastic network of workers, they have a workers' coalition who meet on a monthly basis and it's a great way to introduce a new program or a new worker to the area, and referrals too.* It replaces and supplements formal research and data collection. For example, new resources are recorded on a continually updated bibliography but *at our staff meeting we get teachers to talk about these resources. The teachers tend to talk about how they used the resources, so it's an exchange of information.* Such networking multiplies the impact of existing resources but is sometimes difficult to document and account for. It is *what you could call a 'ripple effect' in the community ... there may only be a core group of six, but what they go out and do in the community with our support ... may then affect 500 people. That sort of thing is very hard to get data on.*

Profile 2: TAFE Institute, research as a line of business

TAFE B is a medium-sized college with under 20,000 students and just over 500 equivalent full-time staff. *The vision of the organisation is to provide a service to our customers: industry clients, past students or a particular curriculum service.* Research is seen as a useful way of achieving this enterprise goal.

There is a strong emphasis on research for planning. *There's been a huge focus on data/information collection ... as part of the quality focus.* Focus groups have been used to monitor customer feedback. Surveys were used to get feedback from staff and students - *We actually got a consultant in to do that.* All this data feeds into the strategic planning process and is used to develop action plans. Course evaluation and focus group data are sent to relevant Associate Directors who use the data to inform course improvement. Another consultant did some work related to marketing short courses. *We now have a marketing manager, a publicity officer and a desktop publisher.* A quality improvement team has been looking at course improvement and *what people do with the information when they get it.* No good evaluating if you're not going to improve and look at your program delivery in the future and make sure you do something with it. Benchmarking has also provided useful feedback. Evaluations are analysed by the head of department and poor staff performance is targeted. A skills audit of staff has been conducted that provided a gap analysis of staff skills. *Each year as a part of our strategic planning, managers have to work with their staff to develop a staff development plan, so we will have departmental priorities.* We look at the results of the skills audit and see where the gaps are and get people to register for staff development in the areas that they need to build up.

The growth of research at TAFE B has been driven by the desire to become the world's best in vocational education and training and one of the ways the Director saw that happening was by us developing through research. The establishment of the R&D Department was a deliberate strategy of management that has expanded project-based research in the Institute. This initiative was initially funded in-house, built up through project-based funding and is now self-financing on the basis of successful contracts and tenders. *It's a money-spinner.* There is a weekly Tender Search, although the department is often included in selective tendering where we've done work for people before or word of mouth. All tenders go through the department and each project brief is assessed by the head of the R&D Department and other relevant heads of department. *We assess whether we have the capacity to go for this project. Do we have the expertise? Can we schedule it into our workload here?* On this basis the department's staff has grown five-fold.

The deliberate growing of research at TAFE B has brought us to where we are today. Research keeps us informed about where the vocational education and training system is going and keeps us at the forefront of training reform. It is also a strategy for staff development. *It's a deliberate strategy to bring people in from the departments, to skill them in research methods and VET policy and practice.* So that's like an action research method. Staff opt into the department because they get paid about \$45,000 - that is, higher than the highest teaching level ... and because of interest and a change from teaching. Professional development is encouraged. *There is a budget for that, both a department and a central budget.* When people undertake professional development they have to say where it fits in with the department and Institute strategic plan, so people are forced to think about why they are doing a particular activity. But there are a number of staff that perhaps won't volunteer to participate in the curriculum area and they wouldn't see research as a critical activity, even though they might be doing it in their everyday job (like evaluation). *There would be a need for support in these areas.*

Profile 3: Non-TAFE provider, market research model

Provider C is a well-established private provider that has long provided commercial training to young men and, later, young women. They have recently extended their market, providing English language for students from South East Asia. Their current business plan is focussed on *maintaining our business college, looking at growing and also improving and increasing the numbers in our language school*. They employ eight full-time staff and about fifteen sessional trainers.

Provider C is experiencing increased competition with TAFE in their traditional business and newer language courses. They have responded by sharply targeting their market and their products. They recognise that student demand depends heavily on their reputation. *The name is so well regarded. We don't do any advertising for placement of our students. So when it comes up that they need someone they'll say, 'look, contact Provider C'. They do not chase employers but they have a personnel folder that's thick each year with records of who's gone where and any contact we've had with any employer. There is a minimal charge to employers when they take a Provider C student.*

Their main concern is to place students and they achieve 100% placement within three months. *Drop out is less than 1% and even when students .. have trouble with the course we would encourage them always to continue .. if they aren't able to receive their certificate for reaching the required competencies, at least they are able to get their statement of attainment, and we would provide them with as much verbal reference .. that we could .. to assist them to get employment. Student evaluations are used to monitor the difficulty of courses and to adjust the content accordingly. The students that we are getting into our business courses are no where near the academic standard that used to be coming into our college. Reports are sent to students and their parents. Mothers and students come in .. to follow up how they've performed. Reports on each student are filed, along with all the other data that relates to that particular student. The student file contains everything. From the first contact that we have, in written contact or correspondence .. every conversation I have with every student is noted on the file. It means that it is possible to go back and look at a particular student.*

Parents choose Provider C because *they know us and the job they think their daughter can get on completing the course. The biggest way we attract students is by word of mouth and the mothers knowing our name. They also advertise on radio and in newspapers, and attend careers nights. Wherever possible we go out and speak to groups of students who are doing business subjects and we target careers teachers in these schools. They are currently increasing the marketing for international students, visiting Asia and attending an Asia Workshop where there are agents coming from all over Asia. Much of their information is gained through word of mouth but government agencies, such as the International Development Program, have provided very good statistics on the number of students coming through and, on a monthly basis, the volumes of student visas from particular countries. These data helps them to pinpoint their marketing. The success of the marketing strategy is regularly reviewed, as are proposals for new lines of business. It's always a trade-off how much you're prepared to outlay to get this new area going and whether the money's available as compared with boosting existing areas that are good.*

Profile 4: Non-TAFE provider, capacity-building strategy

Provider D is a private provider that has grown out of government funded training and industry reform orchestrated through a national industry training advisory body. They see their business as, primarily, training, with research, publication and professional development for VET staff as further lines of activity. There are nineteen staff with three full-time employees. They are refugees from TAFE who share a commitment to *improving their own practice - being learners in their own right*, both in their work and in their professional development. *I'd say we have a culture of research in our organisation.*

Like other providers receiving public funds they collect data for accountability purposes and have a financial management system. *You've got laws to meet .. a small organisation's just as complex as a big one in that regard.* But their distinction lies in the way they make research central to all their work. They have undertaken a range of funded research projects and use an investigative approach to training provision and in their teaching. *In every company where we conduct training our consultants undertake research into the production processes, systems, the culture, the terminology, the formal and informal communication networks, the customers and the suppliers, the management structure and the people - their skills, previous education, country of origin, languages. All of these factors are incorporated into the training that is developed for that company .. Research is our major way of moving forward.*

Action research sets the paradigm for their work and their own practice. They generally do not tender for projects because the questions being asked are too narrow - *the problem is the way the funding agents couch what they want. We are more interested in doing funded research that .. asks the difficult questions, so that we can use research to keep ahead in our thinking.* Research and learning is an ongoing process in the organisation. Staff meetings are scheduled so everyone can attend. Speakers are invited. *X came in and gave us some academic input and we responded by relating this to our practice.* Staff skills are being constantly upgraded. Of the nineteen staff, four are studying for Ph.Ds, another four are doing Masters and one is studying for another postgraduate course. *Anything that a staff member writes is shared amongst the group and people are encouraged to use their work with us as the basis for their research. We don't expect people to do research that is directly aligned to our business. We are really happy that people have a fairly broad area of research. We would maintain that any good qualitative research conducted by our staff has benefits for us as a group and for our business. Because people are interested in what they are doing at work, much of it tends to be useful anyway.*

This business approach was developed on the basis of their initial three-year project funding. *We had the opportunity to plan, experiment, evaluate and reflect, and to try out different strategies and approaches.* But now, with this enterprise capacity and good networks in place, Provider D can sell their approach directly to employers. *The employers can get wonderful returns from this [training] if they are committed to using the skills, expertise and results of their employees' workplace projects done as a part of their course of study. We are looking for a win-win situation .. the company got a lot out of [the training], and the workers just loved it because they learned so much about what other people were doing and they came to a better understanding of the whole operation.*

(i) Articulations between research and decision making

As these profiles indicate, some VET providers reported little articulation between enterprise-based research and operational decision making. Instead the emphasis was on informal methods of intelligence gathering through carefully maintained networks and relationships. In other enterprises linkages existed between data collection, analysis and organisational processes. The articulations appeared to be related to perceptual, motivational and organisational factors.

Perceptual factors. CEO views of research and the culture of VET appeared to influence the articulations between research activity and operational decision making within different VET providers.

CEO perceptions tended to be coloured by the tradition of VET research which institutionalised 'research' as a specialist policy-oriented activity, undertaken by qualified researchers in stand-alone research agencies, and simultaneously remaindered practitioner knowledge production as an invisible, unacknowledged and unendorsed domain of practice. As a result, research was most commonly discussed in terms of a strong distinction between research activity that is 'academic' and research as applied or action research activity or data collection.

Research as an academic activity was talked of and described using adjectives such as 'objective', 'independent', 'formal', 'strategic' and 'pure'. These terms are not neutral and descriptive but embody value judgements about the relevance of things that are deemed 'academic' for VET. Comments made at one TAFE, about the difficulty of getting people to work on research projects, illustrate the point:

They are highly skilled people you need for these projects. They definitely need an extensive background in vocational education and training. Every time we advertise for curriculum officers, we get people with Ph.Ds applying and they are useless to us - they know nothing about VET or haven't got the right kind of attitudes to go into industry and consult with our industry clients. (TAFE G)

Less formal research was often designated applied or action research, or data/information collection, but there was often a reluctance to acknowledge that this really was research. In some cases, this cycle of doing, monitoring, reviewing and improving was associated with processes of continuous improvement. This concept of 'action research' was seen to be a legitimate activity for VET staff without academic qualifications, whereas doing 'research' was seen to require certain academic qualifications. 'Applied research' was used to describe data gathering processes which formed the basis of much work within VET enterprises, but this was commonly downplayed as nothing more than routine work.

A small number of enterprises, however, declined the binary view in which academic research is distinguished from the range of other less formalised processes of knowledge production fundamental to VET enterprise operations.

I'd say we have a culture of research within our organisation. We tend to be reflective practitioners ..in every company where we conduct training, our consultants undertake research into the manufacturing processes, systems, the culture, the terminology, the formal and informal communication networks, the customers and suppliers, the management structure and the people - their skills, previous education, country of origin, languages etc. All of these factors are incorporated into the training that is developed for that company ..every training program is contextualised to the specific company and learning strategies matched to the learning styles of the participants. Research is our major way of moving forward. (Provider B)

Two things follow from this refusal to see 'research' as formalistic academic processes of knowledge production. First, action research and other processes of enterprise-based knowledge production were recognised as legitimate research, rather than being distinguished as somehow not 'real research'. Second, these processes of knowledge production were understood as integral to enterprise operations, not distanced from or substitutional to core business.

These different conceptions of research were closely related to CEO's views of the culture of VET. The traditional and current culture of VET enterprises was not seen to fit comfortably with the notion of research, understood as academic research.

As to whether we'll ever be engaged in pure research, that is to create knowledge for essentially its own sake, I very much doubt. In a dual sector

university, I am quite content for that to be done by people whose predilection is for that kind of work. I think it is fundamentally important. I'm not one who believes that all research should be applied. But for the sector that I am currently responsible for, applied research is clearly what we should be interested in. (TAFE E)

The association between research and appropriate academic qualifications was strongly institutionalised, based in part on assumptions about the traditional role of VET in the range of Victorian educational provision. The relationship between VET and 'hands on', rather than 'heads on', work seems to be pervasive and made it difficult to reconcile what was seen to be a 'heads on' activity like research with the work of VET.

These views of research are significant because they indicate the persistence of old attitudes to research in VET. There was a widespread, in principle, recognition that there was value in integrating research as an activity oriented to generating and using knowledge into the work of VET enterprises. Yet many CEO's ways of understanding research - particularly their distinctions between academic 'real' research and other kinds of knowledge-producing and actioning processes (or 'non-real' research) - militated against this integration in practice. This point is endorsed by a question in the survey which found that respondents perceived themselves to be more interested in research than their enterprises.

Motivational factors. The articulations between research and operational decision making were also influenced by internal and external imperatives. As a result the impulse for enterprise-based research was driven by different patterns of motivation, as follows:

1. In some cases, research was externally motivated as a consequence of systemic requirements for accountability or competition for survival, which became linked to internal motivations related to changing enterprise practices. Research was seen to be particularly helpful in these cases because it was an activity that provided information that could be interrogated and used to inform enterprise improvements. Research was also perceived to serve, maintain, strengthen and demonstrate this improvement:

[Industry satisfaction surveys are done extensively] because we want to know we are going well. That, in a sense, is a kind of feedback loop that says doing a quality job is very important to our future prospects. (TAFE E)

We survey how people feel socially about their work with us and how they feel technically, their response to the environment, if you like, and as a result of it, there are strategies to improve staff satisfaction overall in the organisation in the corporate sense, but also the team leader will develop those strategies based on those results, in their performance plan with me. [What] we prioritise .. becomes then a resource allocation. (TAFE F)

As these comments suggest, CEO's perceptions of research in their enterprises were linked to wider views of their environment, their organisation and their place in the VET sector as a whole. These perceptions in turn affected the nature of research undertaken.

By far the most significant factor determining research activity in VET enterprises was economic competition. The need to have quality systems in place was seen to be crucial to the ability to operate a business in a competitive market environment. Inserted into this relationship between competition and quality, and underpinning the development and maintenance of quality processes, was research activity. It was this articulation between *Competition* → *Research* → *Quality* which determined an enterprise's ability to demonstrate quality and thus their ability to survive in a competitive environment.

As we have been pushed by governments into adopting a more business approach in the way that we run the business now alongside of that we have had to pay much more attention to the quality of the information that we gather in order to sustain a case to funding authorities, capital facilities, or to

some other organisation because we are tendering or wanting to do something else. (TAFE A)

2. In certain VET enterprises, the relationship between competition, quality and research was transposed, so that research activity became a factor determining the acquisition of a competitive edge which ultimately contributed to enterprise growth. In this case the articulation took the form *Research → Quality → Competition*.

We create leading edge sort of practices in the research activity which then builds our reputation and builds our business. (TAFE C).

The reason why we went down the quality journey was we were wanting to become the world's best in vocational education and training ..one of the ways was by us developing through research, developing a high profile and being able to be *au fait* with current developments in VET, and also not only being *au fait* with them, but be leaders in the field ..(TAFE G)

In these cases, VET enterprises have acquired or developed research centres or linked with other institutions (both TAFE and non-TAFE) in order to sharpen their focus on research, and, consequently, to raise their enterprise credibility and profile.

Organisational influences. The CEO interviews revealed a range of further organisational factors that influenced the development of linkages between research activity and operational decision making. These included:

The growing complexity inherent in industrial settings and shifts in industry expectations to which VET enterprises must be responsive:

The system we're in has changed so much that everyone has had to really rethink and refocus on what is the core business. In addition to all the changes in vocational education and training here we're serving an industry ...And the only way to come out the end and to keep prospering and growing in the right way has been through good strategic planning and good research. (TAFE I)

- The need to use research in order to justify claims in relation to organisational changes and funding cuts. One provider, for example, did a student outcomes survey to document the economic outcomes of their programs:

There hadn't been a lot of research in that sector and there was a need from the State Government and Federal Government directions to link the value of adult education, because all the old things about adult - liberal education notion has gone out of the window - it was totally undervalued by the government and there is a need to look at what we knew was happening. We had a whole lot of anecdotal evidence to say that a lot of people come into adult education to do a safe course ..flower arranging or whatever, and go on and do other courses. So it's used as a pathway or to create their own business or set up an extra money-making venture on the side. The government was really pushing against the valuing and understanding of those steps ..I decided to do some research on it. (Provider D)

- Organisational change encouraged research within some providers because it was seen as offering opportunities for staff development and promoting cultural change:

It's a deliberate strategy to bring people in from the departments to skill them in research methods and VET policy and practice generally, so that's like an action model of research and using it in that action way ..the idea is that we've got people dedicated to that, so they're not getting pulled away to teaching duties, but when we bring people in from the departments it's also a staff development activity and it's an actual commitment to that model that

people coming in here are not pulled away to teaching duties. They also learn a lot about the VET system. (TAFE G)

The one thing that research capabilities can deliver is a far more diverse range of activities for your staff to engage in and it may be in the end that creating that diversity is fundamentally important to maintaining the commitment of people. (TAFE E)

Irrespective of the rationale for incorporating research as an area for staff development, greater research activity within VET enterprises does correlate with existence of staff development strategies to mainstream research capacity within the enterprise. To this end, incorporating staff on research projects, encouraging staff to pursue postgraduate qualifications and placing a priority on staff development during staff meetings were identified as factors contributing to research activity. In turn, the level of comfort with the notion of research appeared to be greater in those VET enterprises that explicitly acknowledged and deployed staff development strategies to integrate particular areas of research into staff responsibilities. In these providers, research was not seen as an alien 'academic' activity, but as an applied activity crucial to enterprise development:

no modern organisation that's interested in education and training can afford not to be a research organisation and you've got to have a broad definition of research. It has to do with understanding which bits of the society - in our case, it happens to be industry and/or community - which bits of that can you work effectively for and, in order to understand that, you have got to know something about what the age cohorts are with the areas that you want to work to ...I think that the more successful TAFE institutions will find a way of not doing too much research. They'll find a way of not believing, in the end, that you can't do anything if you haven't got data ...However, the one thing that research capabilities can deliver is a far more diverse range of activities for your staff to engage in. It may be, in the end, that creating that diversity is fundamentally important to maintaining the commitment of people ...There's an energising principle in being able to fall into research work and fall out of it ...it has the advantage of giving your staff a wider range of skills, more interesting things to do. (TAFE E)

Relationships with clients provided a further influence on the articulations between research and enterprise operations. This was made explicit by some CEOs who indicated that their commitment to support client needs and, in particular, encourage individual and community development also encouraged research. Such commitments were often couched in philosophical or political terms and provided a normative framework which guided the work of the enterprise. For example, one community provider described a commitment to women as the motivation for one project:

it was very much in keeping with the philosophy of the ...centre which was, in a sense, that women's contribution to the community is often lost or invisible and we wanted to make sure that the women who played such a big role in this centre were acknowledged. (Provider G)

Further analysis of the CEO interviews suggested that there were a spectrum of provider-client relations. At one extreme there were relationships which were based upon some kind of value consensus, as in the community provider above, where the provider and clients work within a shared normative framework and often towards shared goals. Such *organic* relationships were particularly evident in community and enterprise-based providers. In these cases, the provider could be seen as an outgrowth of the client community. In such providers research was directed towards community development in the host communities.

At the other extreme provider-client relationships were organised through contractual, market relations. There was no pre-existing community which acted as host to the provider. Instead, the provider had to construct a client group through service provision and the formalisation of contractual relations. This *externalised* pattern of provider-client relations was particularly common in commercial providers. It was accompanied by active involvement in market research and attention to

customer service because these activities were crucial to the economic viability of the provider. Significantly, in such providers market research was not simply directed towards determining customer preferences and demands, but involved the active construction of wants and desires as a means of building and consolidating a clientele or market for the services that the provider provided (e.g. Anderson, 1994).

Very often providers showed a variety of client relationships. This was particularly evident in large multipurpose TAFE Institutes. Public sector reform has increased the importance of externalised market relations for public VET providers and this has meant that, at an institute level, considerable effort is devoted to market research and building contractual relationships with clients. At a departmental level, however, and in many community providers, there were still strong organic relationships with different host communities. These organic relationships were organised on the basis of geography/region, occupation, industry, or social group (e.g. Koori, second-chance learner).

Links with other agencies involved in research were also seen to be an important factor in enhancing enterprise-based research. In some cases these links were orchestrated as institutional partnerships with universities, other TAFE Institutes and with industry-based research. In other cases the linkages existed because VET staff were participating in postgraduate studies. In the survey, staff indicated that postgraduate work was the most common way of obtaining research skills.

Having staff who are pursuing postgraduate studies was seen to support enterprise-based research. Seven enterprises in the sample indicated that they supported staff in the acquisition of postgraduate qualifications as a means of improving the quality of work practices, including deepening the research culture in the enterprise.

Independent research work by staff was also seen to contribute to organisational effectiveness, yet monitoring this became less easy in a larger enterprise. One TAFE Institute commented on the difficulty of systematically recording the scholarly or enterprise-based action research of their staff, which meant that senior management was unaware of the full range of activity:

I guess the major research activity that we can't talk to you about .. is the fact that, at [an organisational unit] and individual level, teachers are going about researching their practice in all sorts of ways that isn't capturable at a central level. I think there would be a lot of activity at that level - we just don't know about it. (TAFE C)

The dilemma for enterprises is how to harness individuals' curiosity and willingness to engage in professional development, a developmental activity that is self-directed and increasingly self-funded, so that learning can be optimally deployed and developed for enterprise purposes. There is tension between individual and enterprise purposes. In some CEO interviews the individual purposes of learning and research were downplayed and the emphasis was on deploying staff as a means to achieve enterprise goals: income generation, staff development, cultural change within the organisation. In other cases, the needs of individual VET staff were recognised, factored into the overall management of the organisation and its staff, and negotiated to the benefit of both parties:

We don't expect people to do research that is directly aligned to our business. We are really happy that people have .. fairly broad areas of research, as some like to get down to some fine-grained workplace analysis, while others are more interested in the bigger picture .. All of them have an ethnographic approach to their research ... We would maintain that any good qualitative research conducted by our staff has benefits for us as a group and for our business. Because people are interested in what they are doing at work, much of [the research] tends to be useful anyway. (Provider B)

(ii) Linkages between research and organisational development

The linkages between research and other enterprise activities appeared to be shaped by both CEO perceptions of research and its relationship with VET, and by practical organisational issues within

VET enterprises. These complex articulations mapped onto three different models of organisational development. These were:

Informal model. In less than a fifth of sample enterprises research was seen to be more or less irrelevant to enterprise core business. Organisational development was seen to be a consequence of less formal processes which drew organisational intelligence from good client networks and informal reviews of enterprise core business. More formalised methods of gaining organisational intelligence, such as research, were not seen to be a part of enterprise operations. If any research activity occurred, it was seen either as a distinct line of business which was required to generate income or, more commonly, as competing with other enterprise priorities for enterprise resources.

Strategic planning model. Almost 60 per cent of enterprises undertook research for planning and/or market research and saw this work as being fundamental to good strategic management within their enterprise. In many cases, research was explicitly described as a strategic management tool that could be taken up and used to achieve specific ends, such as the collection of data to inform strategic planning and decision making, and the gathering of market intelligence. Organisational development was seen to be a consequence of good data collection, data management and data analysis that could be used to inform planning and other enterprise decision making. System reform is a driver for this model of organisational development. Providers were willing to allocate resources to support this kind of externally driven research, but expected appropriate returns on their investment. There was some concern that, relative to its costs, such research for strategic planning did not provide easy or adequate inputs to decision making.

Capacity-building model. About a quarter of the seventeen providers saw research as fundamental to their core business because it enhanced staff development and, therefore, enhanced organisational development. Growing the skills and capacities of staff was seen as the key driver in growing the enterprise. Organisational development was seen to be a consequence of both the *findings* of research which informed strategic management and decision making, and staff participation in research which provided *contexts* for staff development. Research was integrated into the active life of the organisation rather than being a distinct set of activities or strategic tools that were applied to specific organisational ends. The view of research as embedded in the organisation can be described as a *research culture*. Providers adopting this model of organisational development allocated resources to support all types of research because they each enhanced enterprise operations by returning findings, contexts and, where appropriate infrastructure existed, income.

These models of organisational development were not specific to particular categories of VET enterprise, but were evident across TAFE, community and private providers. However, there were some indications that the informal model was preferred by some smaller community and private providers. There was growing interest in the strategic planning model as a consequence of system reform, new pressures for reporting and accountability, and market research. Community providers, in particular, showed increased interest in market research, but felt they lacked relevant skills and capacities.

These models of organisational development are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Integration of enterprise-based research and operational decision making in models of organisational development

Informal model	→	Strategic-planning model	←	Capacity-building model
Research and organisational operations are compartmentalised and separate.		Research used instrumentally to meet system and enterprise priorities.		Research is integral to the organisation. Seen as a means of building longer term enterprise capacity.
Individual research not absorbed by organisation.		Individual research used on a limited fit basis.		Individual research integrated productively with organisational operations.

The motivations driving research in enterprises pursuing the strategic-planning model appeared to differ from those enterprises showing a capacity-building approach. In the strategic-planning enterprises research was commonly described as being driven by external motivations and sharply focussed on data collection. About half these enterprises reported difficulties with information management and actioning findings in organisationally useful ways. Capacity-building enterprises revealed a research culture which more often emphasised internal rather than external motivations. Research was seen to be integral to a process of continuous improvement based upon review, reflection and redesign.

In some enterprises, data collected as a result of external pressures for research were seen as difficult and expensive to manage, and not returning significant benefits to the organisation. This assessment that data collection was only for external purposes, and was a cost rather than a benefit, encouraged a retreat from research. This retreat occurred even though the problems of data collection, information management and actioning were a consequence of organisational arrangements as much as the nature of the research itself.

In other enterprises a *practical link* was established between data collection, analysis and outcome improvements. This required organisational support, but enabled the enterprise to contain the effort associated with data collection and extend the analysis and actioning of data in processes of organisational reflection and redesign. In such cases, research driven by external motivations became linked to internal motivations to review, question and improve practice. It led to an association between research, organisational development and change which moved the organisation towards the development of a research culture.

The data suggest that transitions are possible from an organisational development approach in which research is used as a strategic tool to an organisation with a research culture. This transition hinges on individuals' perceptions of the *practical utility* of research in the enterprise. Its effect is to transform the enterprise into a learning/research organisation.

(iii) *Barriers to enterprise-based research*

Data collected in the course of the consultancy indicated that CEOs and individual VET staff saw time, resources, relevant expertise and cultural factors as the main barriers to the productive application of research in operational decision making.

Resource constraints. A lack of time, resources and money to release staff and provide necessary resources were seen to inhibit enterprise-based research. These lacks were particularly acute in small to medium community providers. This is because they are directly linked to lower funding levels available for adult community education in comparison to funding available to traditional VET providers. These arrangements mandate a consistent level of entrepreneurialism and market responsiveness but, in the process, the space for research activity to complement these focusses becomes increasingly narrowed.

The current method of resource allocations confirms the resource limitations that work against the capacity of VET enterprises, more generally, to pursue research. Shifts away from funding infrastructural and other supports towards competitive tendering, based on an amount per student contact hour, were identified by TAFE, community and private providers as constraining their abilities to support research activity in their organisations. As one community provider noted:

A TAFE College has got lots of people that ..are in positions where they don't have lots of other responsibilities and so they've got more flexibility than we have to allocate someone to do research or put a project together. I think they should be putting more resources into us ...They want things from us but they don't understand that they fund us very little as it is. The per student contact hour they fund us for VET things is very low ..its absolutely pitiful and yet they have not put one dollar into our infrastructure.
(Provider D)

Limits of expertise. Expertise was a complex factor. In the survey, contradictory data emerged with VET staff reporting both that they had the skills to undertake research and that further research skills were required. In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to nominate research skills that they felt would enhance their enterprise's research capacity. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Research skills needed to enhance their enterprise's research capacity

Research skills required	Nominations
Research skills/methodology	21
Analysing/interpreting skills	7
Statistical software skills	6
Report writing skills	6
Benchmarking skills	3
Writing skills in general	3
Use of Internet	2
Research opportunities identification	1

The limits of expertise became more clearly defined in CEO interviews. A number of CEOs indicated that, while their enterprises were actively involved in data collection, difficulties were encountered in organising and actioning the data in organisationally useful ways.

One aspect of this barrier, flagged particularly by CEOs in TAFE Institutes, lay in difficulties associated with information management:

[the information management system is] far from sufficiently accessible. I haven't seen one that works the way I would like to see them work ..it just seems that we keep on throwing resources at the information technology systems but we still don't seem to generate the sort of user-friendly, flexible interrogation systems for data bases. (TAFE E)

Well, OTFE have had several attempts to develop a management information system for the TAFE sector and the various attempts have all collapsed. There 's a new attempt on the way now. In our own in-house area we have a number of information centres, but they're not linked or warehoused ... That's what we are aiming towards ..It's a very expensive business. It's beyond our capacity to do it on a stand-alone basis. (TAFE H)

The problem of information management lies partly in technology, but it also lies in the volume of data that is being collected. As a TAFE Director noted, 'The collection of data can become oppressive in its own right'. (TAFE E). A private provider simply took a hard line on data collection:

We don't bog ourselves down in data because we haven't got the people to do it ..We haven't got the luxury of having a whole range of people that are going to just sit there and crunch numbers ..so we just have to make sure that our delivery processes are such that we get a quality outcome and our broader performance indicators are around product quality ..productivity ... absenteeism ..labour turnover ..occupational health and safety [etc.] ... They're the numbers that tell us whether we are doing a good job. (Provider C)

Where some CEOs identified the problem of collecting too much data, others questioned the quality of the data that was collected. One TAFE Director criticised the way data was collected:

a proportion of the work that has been done [on surveys] is on a level that would not be acceptable, at all, to anybody, as any evidence of anything because it is so badly done. They don't define their reference point. They

don't set out a methodology ...They don't say, OK I am trying to think this through. It's going to be this cohort, my intention is to do it annually or every two years ...They just whip out a questionnaire. They don't provide any analysis of the results and, more importantly, they have got no idea of what to do with them. So there are no outcomes at all. It's a waste of time.
(TAFE A)

Another TAFE CEO suggested that sometimes data collection addressed the wrong question, tackling issues that are easily researched rather than dealing with hard questions:

I'm temperamentally suspicious of [Quality Assessment Systems] because I don't believe they, in general, deliver information about the things that are important. They are great on giving information about what's trivial, but who needs that? And the really key things that education enterprises engage in ...quality systems generally don't penetrate ...I would like to have a much better feel for the way in which our students react to the experience of being taught, the way they react to the experience of doing learning in our organisation ...It would be helpful ...because if you are going to have a customer satisfaction ...ethic in your organisation, it's the sort of thing you should know. But finding a way of knowing what's important in a thing as complicated as teaching and learning is very difficult. (TAFE E)

Finally, a number of CEOs commented on the difficulty of using data generated through research to the benefit of the enterprises. One problem related to translating the mass of data into action outcomes that are appropriate to the enterprise. At one TAFE Institute, the CEO commented that data was made available to managers both through the information management system and on paper but 'very few take advantage of it':

I suspect it's because it's very low priority rather than [the managers] not having the skills, because there are enough staff in areas who do have the skills and the perception to see the value of it. I think really they are just bogged down. There are so many other things that are more important, especially as in the action, doing. (TAFE A)

Cultural barriers. Cultural factors were also seen to influence enterprise-based research. Harnessing individual initiative and curiosity to the advancement of enterprise goals is not compatible with closed systems in which divergent views and questioning are not tolerated. The survey and workshop provided some evidence that a culture of questioning was not always tolerated in VET providers.

System culture was also queried by CEOs. Some criticised the use of external research findings relating to industry demand and needs, on which funding decisions were subsequently based, because those findings contradicted their grassroots, local knowledge based on their enterprise intelligence. Another CEO debated whether his enterprise had a role to play in research into the implications of State and national policies. The concern was that if findings were negative and subsequently published, they could have an impact on the enterprise's ability to attract further funding from State or Commonwealth sources.

The broader cultural milieu of the training market, with its emphasis on competition rather than co-operation, was seen to create an environment that was not conducive to the institutionalisation of a research culture. It encouraged the adoption of a short-term focus within organisations, which allowed enterprises to respond flexibly and quickly. However, such time frames were not perceived to facilitate the development of a research culture relying on interrogation and reflection, where time was needed for distillation and action.

Organisational barriers. As these comments suggest, limits of resources and expertise, and cultural factors are associated with wider organisational barriers to enterprise-based research. Some of the more significant factors have already been noted: the problem of contact-hour funding, the imperatives of rapid change and competitive relations between enterprises.

In addition, CEOs noted the problem of employment trends in VET enterprises, which they saw as militating against the development of enterprise-based research. While increasing use of contract or sessional staff was seen to provide flexibility and enterprise responsiveness, the casualisation of staff was seen to hinder staff development and, hence, the development of research capacity within an enterprise. As a TAFE CEO noted:

I'm not sure that it gives us sufficient flexibility ..it just seems to me that you don't always get the best out of people if they don't know what their prospects are from one day to the next. So I have some real problems with that and with marrying it with the notion of flexibility. (TAFE B)

The complex and interactive effects of these barriers to enterprise-based research were revealed in the research strategy planning workshops during which staff from participating VET providers were asked to conduct a gap analysis on their perceptions of their enterprise's actual and preferred research capacity. Some responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Workshop participants' assessments of their enterprise's actual and preferred capacity for research

Enterprise	Current research capacity	Preferred research capacity
TAFE	Capacity to do 50% of projects, requires additional human resources, research not valued in general or, in particular, by managers.	100% research capacity, financial support and a culture that integrated and valued research in enterprise operations.
TAFE	Organisational mismatch of research activity and research skills, need for training in research skills, little opportunity for discussion of research, lack of financial resources to support research, lack of systemic funding.	Enhanced skill development (mentoring and access to technical and academic expertise), enhanced research collaboration between agencies, a culture that extends to the rank and file in valuing research, recognition of research as a job not an add-on, policy and funding support for research.
Non-TAFE provider	Organisational resources limited, skills required, no (enterprise) policy for research, dependence on external agencies to support research, enthusiasm amongst staff for research.	Increased staff resources and research skills, tackle space and other resource limits, develop a research policy.
Non-TAFE provider	Strong research capacity and commitment to research, action research integrated into teaching and learning, good research networks, highly academically qualified staff, limited time and money.	Seek research grants to tackle time and support problem, improve staff writing and research presentation skills, improve marketing.

As these comments suggest, the barriers to research were not simply a lack of resources, but resource constraints linked to management priority setting, organisational obstacles and cultural factors that, for example, confirmed the view that research was not really relevant to VET. The challenge for VET enterprises in pursuing enterprise-based research lies, then, in creating conducive contexts that enable and sustain research. This requires attention to cultural and organisational change both at an enterprise and system level.

3. CONCLUSION

This study indicates that research does impact on goals and operational decision making in VET enterprises. However, there is substantial variation in the extent of enterprise-based research, its character and its applications. This is strongly influenced by the views of research held by enterprise

management and the extent to which they perceive a practical link between research activity and enterprise operations. The findings of this research suggest that organisational and cultural changes are necessary if the full benefits of research are to be realised across the range of VET providers.

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DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF RESEARCH IN A VET PROVIDER

Robin Sefton and Peter Waterhouse¹

1. LEVELS, TYPES AND DOMAINS OF RESEARCH

Analysis of the impact of research upon this provider can be undertaken from multiple perspectives. As noted in the background paper, which is reproduced at Attachment 1 in this book, Weiss has commented (1980) that 'sensitivity to [social science] perspectives' represents one way in which research is reported to have an impact. This is one of the perspectives which is relevant in the present context.

Reflection upon the impact of research upon the organisation suggests the particular value of studies which are grounded in real world observations and which offer critical analysis of work practices, systems of work organisation and learning in the workplace. The limitations of this case study have not allowed an exhaustive analysis of the relevant studies. However, work such as that by Stevenson (1996), Billet (1993), Darrah (1994), Mulcahy (1996), Gowan (1992), Sanguinetti (1994) and Buckingham (1997) is indicative of the kind of grounded work which has been most useful. The specific value of such work has been in its contribution to re-conceptualising notions such as that of competence, particularly the assumption that 'Key Competencies' (Mayer, 1992) are generic and readily transferable. Also in its documentation of real world practices - of both workers *in situ* (within a variety of contexts) and, in some cases, the work of vocational education and training (VET) practitioners operating within these contexts.

The practice of the organisation is also informed by educational theories such as those on adult education, language, literacy and discourse studies, ethnographies and pedagogies of work-related learning, investigations of embedded technical knowledge, and so on. Conceptual understandings that contribute to shaping this organisation's curriculum development and teaching practices also include work in other fields such as political economy, work organisation, human resource management and industrial relations, particularly as these relate to workplace learning. The point here is that it is not merely educational research which has an impact upon educational practices. Within the industry context a wide range of domains (or disciplines) can play a vital role in shaping educational policy and practice - consequently research within or across these domains may be highly relevant.

This form of impact is consistent with the notion of 'ideas in good currency', which is advanced in Attachment 1. However, this metaphor fails to capture the sense of critical engagement (with the ideas) which is necessary. Even solid empirical research findings and useful ideas need to be tested, tried in practice and held to critical scrutiny. It is through engagement with practice that the value, and the limitations, of these ideas are demonstrated.

The second point to note in relation to the impact of this social science research is how the organisation gains access to and takes on board the findings of this work. The practice of the organisation is to make personal contact with researchers and scholars wherever possible. The use of electronic mail facilities has facilitated these contacts in recent times. Inviting speakers to in-house staff meetings, attendance at conferences and seminars, and in-house circulation of journal articles and selected readings are important strategies.

2. COMMISSIONED RESEARCH: PROVIDER AS RESEARCHER

Another perspective to consider is the role of the organisation in conducting commissioned research. From the point of view of our teachers, it has been the research that we have conducted ourselves that has had the greatest impact on our work in industry. There have been four major pieces of research in this category:

¹ Workforce Learning Initiatives Pty. Ltd., Melbourne.

- The Work Placed Education Project (Sefton and O'Hara, 1992);
- An Action Research Project as part of the work of the National Automotive Language and Literacy Coordination Unit (NALLCU) (Sefton, Waterhouse and Deakin, 1994);
- An Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council (ANTARAC) funded piece of research in the area of workplace learning and change (Sefton, Waterhouse and Cooney, 1995);
- A research project funded by the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE) on the training implications of changes in Regulations in the Food Processing Industry (Thomas-Walsh, 1997).

It should be noted, however, that the culture of research that has been developed within the organisation predates these projects. Individual staff members had conducted research over many years prior to the start of the Work Placed Education Project. Indeed, it could be argued that these projects represent the culmination of previous research. The existing culture thus encouraged innovation and supported its application to the teaching practice of staff. It also maximised the impact on the organisation of any relevant research that was conducted.

The Work Placed Education Project involved a survey, conducted by individual interviews with over 600 shop floor workers in the vehicle manufacturing industry, to establish the literacy and language-learning needs of these workers in relation to the newly introduced Vehicle Industry Certificate (VIC). It was based on a grounded understanding of the workplaces and the workers within them, and sought to reduce barriers, minimise problems that may be caused by cultural factors, and maximise the opportunities for workers to demonstrate their skills. Conducted on behalf of the industry, this research also acted as a catalyst amongst enterprises and the union to raise awareness and warrant joint action to meet the identified needs. The project findings were embraced by the industry stakeholders and used to support submissions for government funds. As a result NALLCU was established and worked within the industry for the following three years. Every recommendation in the final report of the Work Placed Education Project was implemented during that time and a thousand copies of the report were distributed to people within and outside the industry.

As part of the work of NALLCU a major action research project was initiated. This consisted of conducting a total of six projects within different enterprises, with a view to developing a new model of workplace learning that would address the identified literacy and language needs of workers within an integrated training paradigm. It attempted to demonstrate to industry stakeholders that the goals of training that they desired could best be obtained from workplace education that was contextualised to each specific workplace, using the cultural diversity of the workplace as an advantage rather than treating it as a deficit, and placing employees in mixed ability, multi-ethnic groupings that mirrored the workplace. This practice was foreign to an industry where there had been a history of language audits leading to streamed language classes, and a view of the need to develop 'enabling skills' as a prerequisite to undertaking VIC. It also demonstrated to the union that, given appropriate adjustments to the training, all workers could gain immediate access to accredited training and the concomitant financial rewards in programs that were designed to showcase their abilities and knowledge.

The approach that was developed as a result of this research has proved very successful within the automotive manufacturing industry, particularly in smaller component manufacturing companies where streamed classes are not practical. It has created the foundation of educational practice for staff in our current company and forms the basis of all the training they conduct. The report on this project, *Breathing Life Into Training: a model of integrated training* has had a very broad distribution, both across Australia and overseas. However, it is difficult to assess the impact it may have had in the work of practitioners from other providers across this or other industries. To our knowledge, some of the case studies have been used in teacher education courses, and, in one case that we know of, the whole report was used as a key text.

The ANTARAC-funded research project on *Workplace Learning and Change: the workplace as a learning environment* allowed an opportunity to revisit two sites of the previous research several years after the original project, and to investigate two other sites in which integrated training had been conducted by our staff. The literature search in itself was of benefit to our organisation, and the framework that was

used to analyse the findings has been useful as a tool to reflect on the results of the practice of staff. The main findings of this research led to an understanding of the importance of integrating on and off-the-job training and confirmed the findings of the previous project by evaluating the residual effects of the approach which had been implemented.

The project funded by the Victorian Government's OTFE was conducted on behalf of the Victorian Food Industry Training Board. It examined the perceived impact on the industry, and the subsequent training requirements, of the new Food Standard which focussed on hygienic and safe food production. The researcher surveyed a number of food-producing sites, visited enterprises and interviewed key personnel.

These four research projects, although quite different, had several features in common:

- they were all grounded in a knowledge of workplaces developed through practice, in the understandings developed by teachers as reflective practitioners, and informed by an ethnographic stance;
- each was informed by a multi-disciplinary appreciation of theory, from educational and other fields;
- whilst a large amount of quantitative data was collected, the qualitative nature of the research was paramount in each case, with a strong emphasis on links between theory and practice;
- the research was designed to have an impact on both the policy and practice of VET.

In terms of the first three projects mentioned above, the impact of the research on the practice of the practitioners involved was profound, but it appears that it may have also reached beyond the immediate practitioners and the industry in which the research was conducted. The degree of impact outside our own organisation, and particularly outside the automotive industry, is very difficult to estimate. However, in the section devoted to the principles of the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) Program within the 1996 funding guidelines it is stated that *Activities should be integrated into the framework of mainstream workplace training provision.*² Thus it would appear that this research project, conducted with WELL funding, may have affected policy in this regard.

The wider impact of the last piece of research is yet to be determined. However, it was through this research project that the company developed a profile in the Food Industry and gained access to the development and delivery of training in the Certificate in Food Processing in the industry. This is yet another example of the impact of research upon the organisation.

3. PRACTITIONERS AS RESEARCHERS

Another dimension to the culture of research within the organisation might be characterised as day-to-day practitioner research. This is the research which practitioners undertake as a routine part of the development and implementation of contextualised enterprise-based training programs. It is the policy of this organisation that, as far as possible, the staff researching and developing a training program are also responsible for its implementation. Thus teachers are engaged in research and development work at the enterprise level; conducting Learning Needs Assessments, Learning Environment Analyses and Training Needs Analyses. These processes involve research skills such as conducting interviews, document evaluation, policy and content analysis, participant observation and conducting surveys.

Even after a program has been designed and curriculum materials drafted, there remains the continuing investigation required as a necessary part of the work-based training program itself. The teaching methods associated with inquiry-based learning strategies involve genuine research. The context of workplace learning is one in which the circumstances and context are constantly changing. Curriculum thus needs to be flexible and programs need to be dynamic. The demands on the enterprise-based teachers are significant. They are constantly tracking materials, suppliers and customers, investigating problems and researching solutions, gathering, organising and presenting data. See, for instance Sefton, Waterhouse and Deakin, 1994; Waterhouse, 1996; Waterhouse and

² WELL 1996 Guidelines, Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Miller, 1996; and Waterhouse and Sefton, 1997. Some might argue that such work does not constitute 'real' research, but it certainly involves real research skills, on the part of VET teachers.

It might also be noted here that these experiential and action-learning approaches also involve the VET learners, in our case shop floor operators and non-trades personnel, in the development of research skills. To address and solve real workplace problems they need to formulate questions, gather and organise data and present their findings to the stakeholders - not only their co-workers and peers, but also supervisors, union and management representatives.

Although it may not be auspiced or sanctioned by the higher education academy, such work by teachers and learners can provide very real impacts for the individuals involved and for the enterprises concerned. Each workplace becomes a site for such research. This work is generally ongoing throughout the life of the VET program.

At another level the individual staff within this provider are engaged in their own research and higher education studies which inform their practice and contribute to the intellectual life of the organisation. Of the nineteen staff employed by the organisation ten are currently involved in formal studies, from Graduate Diploma level courses through to Ph.D. dissertations. Within the domain of formal research the following studies are being conducted currently:

Table 1: Private research by staff

Purpose	Title of Research
Ph.D. Dissertation	Experiential Learning, Professional Development and the Practice of Adult Literacy and Basic Education
Ph.D. Dissertation	Educational Implications of Industry Restructuring in the Vehicle Manufacturing Industry in Australia
Ph.D. Dissertation	Investigating Radical Adult Education for the Workplace
Ph.D. Dissertation	Introduction of Teams and Work Groups to the Motor Vehicle Industry
Masters Dissertation	Cultural Change in Workplace Decision making
Masters Project	The Training Implications of Self Regulation in the Food Processing Industry
Masters Project	Work Related Learning
Masters Project	The Notion of Competency as it is Used in Australian VET

Thus it can be seen that the more experienced staff have already commenced research careers and published research through various consultancy projects, secondments and contract appointments over a number of years. Their experience informs and shapes the culture of the organisation.

4. RESEARCH INFORMING LOCAL PROVIDER POLICY

There is a widespread belief that 'the locus of policy and planning decisions primarily is at the level of national and State and Territory Governments, within Ministerial offices and departments and agencies', as suggested in Attachment 1. However, policy and planning is also critical at the local and provider level. First, to determine the relationship between broader or national policy directions and the local variations, consequences and manifestations. Then secondly, to determine appropriate implementation strategies (assuming organisational policy is committed to the implementation of national directives).

It is one thing, for instance, to accept the overall thrust of national policies promoting Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). However, it is another matter to determine the most appropriate means (or practices) by which the principles can facilitate student access and effective implementation of RPL. At this level it is essential that decisions are made, not merely on the basis of espoused government policy (or theory), but on the best available grounded knowledge, experience and advice about the

consequences of particular interpretations and implementation strategies. Ongoing reflection on practice and informal action research is thus a key factor in shaping policy and policy implementation. Within this enterprise these processes are promoted through enterprise-based needs analysis and documentation processes; ongoing collaborative curriculum development, review and evaluation strategies; and a commitment to continuous processes of critical reflection and staff development. In the best of all possible worlds the lessons from this grounded experience real world practice and analysis are cycled back into the policy formation process so that policy becomes a means of promoting and supporting good practice.

5. PROVIDER AS MEDIATOR AND RESEARCH ADVOCATE

Finally we would note the role which VET providers with a culture of research, may play in acting as mediators and advocates for industry-based research. Such a provider is in a position to liaise, to facilitate access, to explain and interpret research to industry stakeholders and to promote research which addresses the needs of those stakeholders. At the same time such research can inform academic understandings, assist in the development of grounded theory and the generation of new understandings for further investigation. Thus the VET provider may be in a unique position, with one foot in the grounded realities of workplace practices, technologies and processes, and the other foot in the world of academia, empirical research and critical inquiry. In addition to its own research at various levels, this organisation has also played a contributing role in facilitating access for external researchers conducting significant research projects which were based upon participant observation, the conduct of surveys and interviews in work sites.

6. CONCLUSION

Whilst it is possible to estimate the impact of research on one's own organisation when that organisation is a small private company, it is much more difficult to estimate the impact of the research that has been conducted by the organisation on other practitioners working in the automotive or any other industry, on the policy of the VET system, or on the educational practices of other organisations. This case study has focussed on the former aspect and has attempted to demonstrate the critical connections that exist in one organisation between research and the day-to-day operations of the company. It is suggested that a culture of research in an organisation is essential if the findings of research are to affect its policies and practices, and that the ongoing critical reflection on practice to inform, confirm and modify research is an essential part of the process.

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THE CROSS-SECTORAL EXPERIENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF CREDIT TRANSFER IN VICTORIA'S DUAL SECTOR INSTITUTIONS

Richard Trembath¹

1. THE CONTEXT

1.1 Background

The project which is the subject of this case study was carried out by the Educational Program Improvement (EPI) Group, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), with half of the project funding deriving from the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE), Victoria. The aim of the project was to evaluate the effect of articulation in Victoria's three dual sector universities: RMIT, Victoria University of Technology (VUT) and Swinburne University of Technology. The focus was on student experience of the process of credit transfer and the extent to which programs at different institutions had been successful. The research methodology used in the project involved questionnaire, interview and an examination of student records. Quantitative and qualitative analysis were both used.

Previous research in the area had examined student transfer between different sectors of tertiary education, students' perceptions of the differences in delivery styles between the two sectors, why students choose to transfer from one sector to another, and how former Technical and Further Education (TAFE) students perform when enrolled in undergraduate programs. Much previous work had been based on data drawn from single institutions. Institutions themselves had often concentrated on research or data which indicated that major projects such as Pathways (1992-1993) were successful in boosting the numbers of ex-TAFE students entering higher education.

Therefore, the lines of the Cross-Sectoral Project were set:

- Concentrate on experiential data - how students perceived the credit transfer process;
- Examine data from more than one institution.

1.2 The organisations

The project was an RMIT project. Although it was half-funded from OTFE, the latter organisation was not part of the project team or the reference committee. Data was, of course, obtained from the three dual sector universities mentioned above, but VUT and Swinburne did not manage the project, nor participate in the research except as suppliers of the data.

It is, of course, the case that any report which examines credit transfer and articulation within three large institutions in Victoria is likely to have some implications for the three institutions themselves and for the training system as a whole. However, this case study is restricted to studying the effects of the Cross-Sectoral Project upon the host institution, RMIT. I am not in a position to comment on the effects on the other organisations except in a rather anecdotal manner.

RMIT is Australia's largest dual sector tertiary institution, with approximately 40,000 students. Its two chief campuses are located in the central business district of Melbourne and at Bundoora in the northern suburbs. About 30% of the student body are in the TAFE sector. The university has a considerable number of articulation and credit transfer arrangements in place. It has also established a target that 10% of those commencing undergraduate (degree) courses should come from students with a TAFE background.

¹ Richard Trembath was the VET Research Co-ordinator at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

1.3 The research

Context

The funding sources for the Cross-Sectoral Project have been noted above. OTFE provided half of the original grant money, though in the end the project ran over time and RMIT picked up a considerable amount of infrastructure costs (accommodation, fax, printing) as well as some extra salary costs associated with the project officer and a consultant brought in to carry out the high level quantitative analysis. This run-over of costs is significant as demonstrating RMIT's commitment to some level at least of research into credit transfer and articulation. The research was felt to be of some level of importance for an institution which comprises both sectors of post-secondary education.

The motivation for carrying out the research was complex. There had been some interest at senior management level in understanding more fully the nature of, and reasons for, intersectoral transfer. This interest was motivated by a desire to enhance RMIT's recruitment strategies and ensure that high performing TAFE students were attracted to RMIT's degree programs, and, as importantly, ensure that students with a higher education background were attracted to RMIT's TAFE offerings.

In the following ways previous research into credit transfer and articulation had had some effect on RMIT senior management:

- there was an awareness (most marked amongst TAFE managers at RMIT) that previous research had established that in many higher education disciplines former TAFE students performed at least as well as students entering higher education from other backgrounds.
- there was an awareness that Barry Golding's research had established the probability that the 'flow' of students from higher education to TAFE was far greater than the much more publicised 'flow' from TAFE to higher education, which had, after all, been the subject of a considerable amount of project funding in Victoria.

At another level, that of middle or departmental management, the motivation to carry out this research was less strong than the motivation to establish RMIT VET's bona fides as a practitioner of VET research. Between 1994 and 1995 a decision had been made to establish a research profile within the VET component of the university. When OTFE announced that a round of competitive grants was to be made available in 1995 this was seen as the ideal opportunity to 'put some runs on the board' in an area where RMIT's major role in the Pathways project, dual sector nature, and the availability of the appropriate personnel, gave us an advantage.

At the practitioner level the research carried out in the Cross-Sectoral Project was seen as following up some interesting lines of inquiry which had been exposed by previous investigations. (See above under 'Background'.) At practitioner level, too, the research was seen as having implications for a range of actual or potential student recruitment strategies, including the possible creation of associate degrees or dual award (VET/Higher Education) courses.

Methodology

This has also been touched upon under 'Background' but is spelled out at more length here. The research involved both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. Three main methods were employed to gather information: demographic data derived from university student enrolment databases; questionnaire response data gathered directly from students; and opinions gathered through telephone interview.

Questionnaires were directed to students with a TAFE background at RMIT and VUT who were enrolled during 1994 and 1995 in the higher education sector. Due to differences in information systems at RMIT and VUT surveys were sent to:

- articulating students at RMIT who had obtained credit transfer; and
- students at VUT who had moved from TAFE to higher education (but who had not necessarily obtained any credit for previous TAFE studies).

The questionnaire was organised into five main sections:

- previous TAFE studies;
- transferring from TAFE to higher education;
- difference in education experience between TAFE and higher education;
- general difference between TAFE and higher education sectors; and
- personal outcomes.

A structured interview followed the return of the questionnaire to specifically investigate student perceptions of the credit exemption process and differences between TAFE and higher education.

Swinburne did not participate directly in this study in the sense of providing data similar to that described above. That institution had already undertaken surveys similar to that proposed for the Cross-Sectoral Project and it was felt that there was no need to re-survey the same individuals as the project team was able to gain access to the Swinburne analysis.

1.4 Significance

This case study is significant as an example of an institution attempting to gauge student opinion of recent changes (the introduction of more flexible credit transfer arrangements) in order to:

- assess whether these changes had achieved some of their stated objectives and if some further alterations to process were necessary (past perspective or retrospective view); and
- assess how admission and student recruitment policies and curriculum practices could be amended to take account of patterns of student movement (future perspective or prospective view).

The author of this case study was involved in the Cross-Sectoral Project as the project manager. The project was essentially my proposal as envisaged in a project brief to OTFE. The functions of the project manager are described below in the appropriate section of this case study.

2. THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATION AND ITS PROCESSES

2.1 Overview

At the time this project was carried out (September 1995-April 1996) RMIT was undergoing a restructure which has put into place the administrative and systems framework currently in existence. For the purposes of this case study that was the structure of the university being brought into place at the time of the Cross-Sectoral Project approximately a year earlier. As an overarching measure the TAFE and higher education components of the university were formally integrated into the one structure of four divisions: Education and Training; Research and Development; International; and Resources.

The project was administered from the EPI Group located in the Education and Training Division. The EPI Group moved into an integrated VET/higher education structure halfway through the project on 1 January 1996.

RMIT has been described in broad terms earlier in this case study. The EPI Group which carried out the project was established through integrating TAFE and higher education units. It was intended to provide more effective and efficient educational support services to the Faculties and a more coherent contribution to the implementation of the RMIT teaching and learning strategy.

2.2 Decision making

This section of the case study concentrates on those levels of decision makers at RMIT who had any possible impact on the conduct of the Cross-Sectoral Project and on the project's reception and application within RMIT.

The levels of decision making were, in ascending order:

VET Research Co-ordinator, Project Manager

Deputy Director, EPI Group

Director, EPI Group

Pro Vice-Chancellor, VET/Director, TAFE

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education and Training

- The Project Manager (immediate decision maker). As project manager I had overall responsibility for the successful conduct of the research task. I was ultimately responsible for the lines of investigation, although the two project officers, one working on quantitative analysis, the other working on qualitative analysis, had a considerable degree of independence in the approach they could take to their research. This was especially true of the former who was an expert on statistical method (something the project manager could never claim). I was also responsible for the delicate task of co-ordinating approaches to Swinburne and VUT, which required patience and finesse at times in order to secure access to enrolment data and student addresses. I was responsible ultimately for the preparation of the final report, though once again the other two persons involved wrote considerable portions of the final product.
- The Deputy Director, EPI Group, who was in charge of the VET side of affairs at the time. The Deputy Director's role was largely restricted to one aspect of the project - the financial. She made the crucial decisions to support the project with RMIT money and with RMIT in-kind support. Other than that she was content to let the project manager conduct the project.
- The Director, EPI Group. The Director's role in this project was non-existent. As this project took place during the period of the integration of the two sectors the Director (who was from Higher Education) was content to let decisions be made through the former (VET only) structure.
- The Pro Vice-Chancellor, VET/Director, TAFE. Before 1 January 1996 (approximately half way through the project) this person was the Deputy Director's direct supervisor. The then Director, TAFE, had direct responsibility for the administration of the TAFE sector, including its teaching programs. After 1 January 1996 the Director, with his new dual title, lost these direct responsibilities which were instead invested in the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education and Training, and the new eight-faculty structure.

After the completion of the report proper in the first half of 1996 and during the period when the report was being digested by the university, the Pro Vice-Chancellor, VET/Director, TAFE had the responsibility for:

- deciding what weight should be given to the Cross-Sectoral Report (if it should be 'pushed');
- deciding how widely it should be disseminated; and
- deciding initially if any of the recommendations contained in the Cross-Sectoral Report should be directed to the appropriate forums within RMIT. This decision-making threshold was crucial as the changes to the PVC/Director's responsibilities, post-integration, meant that he could not personally be responsible for implementing any of the recommendations.

That, however, is only part of the story. Most (if not all) of the recommendations contained in the Cross-Sectoral Report affected the interface between TAFE and Higher Education; and the interface between teaching programs and the administrative framework of the university, i.e. student admissions, selection, etc.

Any implementation of the recommendations contained in the report, even those relating to the need for further research in the area, involved consultation with a wide range of interests across the university, and probable compromise and adjustments to the original proposals in order to accommodate different interests. The research was such that it was not possible for a single person, or layer of the administration, to decide 'yea' or 'nay' on any proposed change.

In other words, the crucial decision-making level for the implementation stage of the Cross-Sectoral Project (not the operational stage during the project) tended to rest with informal

consultations between ad hoc groups of people. Occasionally, matters could be referred to standing committees of the university, but not often.

- The Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education and Training. This senior officer of RMIT had a wide range of responsibilities. The role of the DVC in the decision-making process, as far as it affected the Cross-Sectoral Project, was to arrange for the execution of any decisions made by the informal ad hoc groups described above.

2.3 Research

The Research and Development Division of RMIT supports and facilitates RMIT's collaborative and partnership arrangements with government, community organisations, other educational institutions and providers and industry.

In recent years RMIT has concentrated on enhancing its research and development (R&D) role. For example, a number of issues have been identified for further advancing R&D within the university. These include linking R&D more effectively with teaching and learning; fitting research and development into an academic's work schedule; promoting R&D within the university; and enhancing the R&D profile through collaboration with industry and high level recruitment.

RMIT looks to advance its standing in R&D by moving up the pecking order or ladder of Australian universities and hence moving up internationally. Over the last two years RMIT has advanced from 17th to 15th in R&D performance, as indicated by the national research quantum allocation. The target is to move steadily towards the top band of Australian universities in research performance. Of course, this 'table' is based almost entirely on research within higher education rather than within the VET sector.

A crucial issue therefore is how does research in VET fit into the larger scheme of things? At RMIT an attempt was made during 1996 to identify those areas which it was felt deserved VET researchers' attention at the university. The following items were identified as representing broad areas of significance: workplace assessment; teaching styles; labour market factors including vocational outcomes of courses; the introduction of distance and flexible modes of teaching; and cross-sectoral relationships including credit transfer and the recognition of prior learning.

And who were these researchers, or potential researchers, whose opinions we tapped? The answer to this illustrates the fragmented nature of VET research both at RMIT and within the VET system generally. They comprised a motley bunch of interested teachers, concerned Heads of Department, statistics people, quality practitioners and academics with an interest in VET outcomes - very few with the word research mentioned in their position descriptions. RMIT may be an integrated university but a healthy list of publications is not yet *de rigueur* for a VET teacher's promotion. Research is something fitted in, on the side or along the way, for many VET researchers.

2.4 Past impact and use of research

My answer under this heading is restricted to VET-oriented research at RMIT and interprets 'research' broadly. My answer is in part limited by my relatively brief period of employment at RMIT (since 1993).

Generally speaking, VET research at RMIT has had a muted impact on decision making. This is the opinion most often advanced by senior officers on the VET side of the institution. As evidence for this statement I can cite the following items:

- the decision to appoint a full-time VET research co-ordinator from 1995, part of whose brief was to enhance the standing of research in VET at the university;
- the role played by the Director, TAFE in 1994 to facilitate the creation of research networks within the training system in Victoria; and
- the educational role of the VET research co-ordinator during 1995 in alerting staff to the role that applied vocational research could play in such areas as curriculum development and course design.

Of course, applied research at RMIT had been carried out before 1995 by a number of areas, especially by what is now called the Strategic and Financial Planning Group (for a description of this area of RMIT see below.) As an example of this applied research I cite the work they undertook in 1993-1994 on the RMIT Graduate Destination Survey (GDS), a thoroughgoing survey and analysis of the employment outcomes of RMIT VET graduates. It is significant that the final reports were published in a glossy high quality format and disseminated widely throughout RMIT and the training system generally.

Yet even with this major piece of work (whose quality was noted throughout the training system) the effect on decision making was probably limited. Perhaps 'limited' is inexact. The effect of the 1993 Graduate Destination Survey was felt not so much in the short as in the medium term. The 1993 GDS data, being the first collection of its type, was mainly used at the corporate level, mainly as a 'marketing' tool. All relevant data were provided to the RMIT VET Schools for use in their planning processes. The true value of the 1993 survey was that it laid the basis for subsequent surveys. The *cumulative* value of the surveys was to highlight the problems with our enrolments and results delivery processes, which problems are gradually being addressed I understand. This problem, identified in the 1993 survey, had little or no attention given to it at the time. The 1996 GDS identified the problem of late delivery of results and certificates as having grown in the intervening years with nothing done about the problem. The result of the two surveys put together meant that something needed to be in place to deal with the problems that were identified.

2.5 Internal research and data collection/analysis resources

A number of areas carry out the above functions for RMIT VET. The most significant is the Strategic and Financial Planning Group, located within the Resources Division. The key role of the Strategic and Financial Planning Group is to manage the university's strategic planning and budget process and ensure the quality of these processes throughout the university.

As regards data, they collect and monitor the quality of data relating to all financial aspects of the university's operations and in relation to student enrolments. They also collect data from other Divisions regarding the performance of the university *vis-à-vis* the targets and indicators set in the Strategic Plan. They also handle data about RMIT's comparative performance *vis-à-vis* other institutions available from the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs and OTFE sources.

3. RELEVANT RESEARCH: USE AND INFLUENCE

3.1 Overview

The research that was available to the decision makers consisted of the report which contained a comprehensive description and analysis of the data elicited during the project. The project officers were also available for presentation of data and conclusions, though it is fair to say that this was not an opportunity used much within RMIT. Outside RMIT it was a different story - the results of the Cross-Sectoral Project were, as noted before, distributed widely through conferences, articles etc.

3.2 Details

1. *Finding that most articulating students considered that their decision to move onto higher education was a good one:*

'[The] overwhelming majority of students participating in this project considered that their decision to undertake university level study was a good one. Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses showed students expressed - often in glowing terms - their appreciation of the articulation process and the educational opportunities offered by the pathways that exist in post-secondary education' (*Cross-Sectoral Report*, OTFE version, 1996, p. 41).

This is what I have called above the retrospective use of this particular piece of research. It effectively acted as an evaluation of the efforts made in the RMIT Pathways Project (1992-1993), when considerable efforts were made to enhance the articulation arrangements at the university.

2. *Finding that a percentage of students had problems with the current administration of credit transfer procedures:*

'A sizeable minority of students expressed concern over the way in which credit transfer, or exemption procedures, were administered at RMIT and VUT. This perception has a number of different aspects: clumsy processing of claims for credit, lack of communication between TAFE and higher education, or in some cases, outright hostility on the part of higher education staff to ex-TAFE undergraduates. The authors of this report feel that more attention has been given in the past to the establishment of pathways than there has been to the servicing of those pathways' (*Cross-Sectoral Report*, pp. 41-42).

3. *Finding that there was an apparent decline in the number of students granted credit transfer:*

'Data has been presented which indicates that at RMIT there was a significant drop in the number of students granted credit for TAFE studies between 1994 and 1995, in fact a percentage decrease of approximately 21%. Further study is needed to determine whether the apparent decline in the occurrence of credit transfer at RMIT is a trend or just a statistical blip' (*Cross-Sectoral Report*, p. 43).

4. *Finding that there were deficiencies in the TAFE curriculum as a preparation for study within higher education:*

'The authors suggest that there are three possible solutions to the 'bare spots' in the TAFE curriculum as a preparation for higher education:

- modify appropriate parts of the TAFE curriculum
- modify appropriate parts of the higher education curriculum
- conduct bridging programs in relevant areas for those exiting TAFE and entering higher education' (*Cross-Sectoral Report*, p. 44).

3.3 Decision making

Finding 1:

This finding served, in effect, to justify much of the effort undertaken in the Pathways Project at RMIT. Its effect on decision making, especially in terms of externally validated evidence, is hard to untangle. The finding, however, has been cited in documentation (for example, submissions to OTFE) being used (with other data) to demonstrate that RMIT's policies on credit transfer and articulation are working. This finding impacts on decision making in a negative sense: it justifies the decision not to radically change existing practices in the credit transfer field.

Finding 2:

With this finding it is important not to establish a causal link that is not there. The Cross-Sectoral Report recommended changes to credit transfer procedures. Since that recommendation was made RMIT has made some adjustments to procedures. However, there is no evidence, not even anecdotal, to suggest that the Report influenced the relevant area within RMIT, the Office of Prospective Students, except as yet another report that was part of the 'general environment'. I think the changes would have been implemented anyway for the most part.

Finding 3:

This finding has also not influenced decision making at RMIT. The reason for this is not hard to find. RMIT has established a target that 10% of students commencing higher education undergraduate courses should be TAFE qualified. This target is vigorously enforced, with individual faculty targets being set and monitored by central administrative bodies within RMIT. RMIT has exceeded the 10%

target in the last two years and it is this figure which is seen as crucial to the successful maintenance of pathways at RMIT. In other words the statistic which is regarded as important at RMIT is *the percentage of those ex-TAFE students entering higher education, not the percentage of these articulating students who actually are granted credit*. (It is perfectly possible for an ex-TAFE student to be allowed through the portals of higher education, but not be granted credit for their previous studies).

Finding 4:

This part of the Cross-Sectoral Project research has had an effect on decision making at RMIT. I qualify this statement by suggesting that this finding has had an effect only in combination with other trends or changes operating in 1995-97. It has had an effect because at the time that the Report was being disseminated throughout RMIT and the training system generally other factors were present which facilitated modifications to curriculum along the lines of the changes we recommended. These other factors were:

- the integration of the TAFE Schools into the Faculty structure on and after 1 January 1996; and
- the move towards establishing dual award courses at RMIT.

By dual award courses is meant courses which combine TAFE and higher education subjects or modules. There are now four in existence, or at planning stage at RMIT. To achieve these dual award courses curriculum modifications often have to take place so as to ensure a smooth program of study for the student.

Similarly, during 1996-97 there was a number of other curriculum initiatives which have seen considerable attention being given to the interface between TAFE and higher education courses.

The Cross-Sectoral Report alone would not have influenced decision makers within the Division of Education and Training to investigate such curriculum modifications. The Report was again part of a general atmosphere conducive to changes in the curriculum area. It could be cited as 'the figures' to back up changes which may well have been made anyway.

4. IMPEDIMENTS TO USING RESEARCH

The first barrier noted under this heading was that the research was originated from the bottom up. The scope of the project, its scale and its focus were devised at the lower levels of decision making as described earlier in the case study. It would have been better to have consulted more widely amongst senior decision makers at the university prior to the project's inception in order to:

- (a) incorporate their thinking about the area of credit transfer and articulation into the research design; and
- (b) ensure their support for the research more completely and to establish a formal framework within RMIT for the examination and/or possible implementation of the recommendations.

Senior managers at RMIT were the stakeholders for the Cross-Sectoral Project.

The second barrier or difficulty faced by the Project was more of a cultural problem. As noted in the relevant sections of the case study VET research is still in a handmaiden's role - useful but subordinate - and its role in university life, including influencing decisions as to policy and practice, is still being determined.

LOST IN ACTION?: THE CASE OF ARE YOU BEING SERVED?¹

Damon Anderson²

1. INTRODUCTION

This case study examines the impact of research from below on official and unofficial decision making in the Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. It does so by evaluating the impact of a study which investigated student perspectives on support services and amenities in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system (Anderson, 1995). This research study has been chosen for evaluation because it was conceived and primarily designed, managed and conducted by TAFE students, albeit with funding sourced from a national government agency. As an example of student-initiated research, it therefore differs substantially from most of the case study evaluations of research impact in the VET sector that were included in the seminal work by Selby Smith, Hawke, McDonald and Selby Smith (1998).

The case study begins by outlining the context of the research and tracing its gestation, formation and dissemination. The penetration and reception of the research at different levels of decision making in TAFE are then examined and its subsequent influence on policy, planning and practice in TAFE is evaluated. The case study concludes by analysing the reasons why the nature and degree of the research's impact varied so widely among different groups of decision makers in TAFE.

The case study evaluation is based on extant documentary material and anecdotal observations by informants who were involved in the research process and/or were strategically placed to reflect on the subsequent reception and impact of the research on decision-making processes at various stages and levels. Supplementary data were collected via telephone consultations, e-mail correspondence and a short questionnaire distributed to a random sample of student services managers and staff in three States and one Territory during the preparation of the case study. In order to protect their anonymity, most informants and survey respondents have not been identified.

2. CONTEXT

In the late 1980s, Federal and State VET ministers initiated a dual process of micro-economic and public sector reform to reduce government expenditure and promote greater efficiency and responsiveness to industry needs in the TAFE sector. The initial thrust of the training reform agenda was to develop a national VET system driven by the needs of industry and geared for economic growth (Dawkins and Holding, 1987; Dawkins, 1989). Following the release of the Deveson review (1990), the goal of establishing an industry-driven training system was coupled with that of developing an 'open training market' based on the principles of choice and competition. Market advocates argued that TAFE would become much more efficient and client-focussed if it was subjected to competition for resources from private (non-TAFE) providers. In a context of severe public sector budgetary restraint, user payments by individuals and industry were promoted as a means by which to inject more private resources into the provision of TAFE programs and services. To maintain equitable access in a user-pays environment, emphasis was placed on meeting 'the community service obligations of government-provided training, especially where access by the disadvantaged is involved' (Deveson, 1990, p. 61).

Among the wide range of reforms undertaken during this period, VET policy, planning, resource and curriculum frameworks were realigned with industry needs, private providers were officially

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the many TAFE students, VTSAN and the former ESSSC who made the original research possible, in addition to the numerous informants and survey respondents who made invaluable contributions to this case study. Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the author, as are the views expressed herein.

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recognised, the legislative embargo on tuition fees in TAFE was lifted, TAFE institutes were encouraged to pursue industry training contracts, and government funds were increasingly allocated to public and private providers via competitive tender. Following the Finn review (1991), ambitious national targets were also set to increase participation in VET programs. Against this background, TAFE institutes were expected to become more productive, market-oriented and client-focussed:

Overcoming TAFE's internal inefficiencies is crucial to increasing participation ... Teachers and colleges must do more to help and encourage students to complete their studies. High attrition rates can no longer be regarded as an acceptable fact of life in TAFE. Each student who drops out must be seen as a loss to the system and a wasted investment .. Increasing participation does not of itself improve outcomes. TAFE staff and colleges will need to improve their ability to identify, understand and satisfy the needs of TAFE key clients - students, industry and the community .. Systems must study their clients' needs, and how well they are being met ... The development of a client oriented culture in TAFE will be essential to its success in the commercial training market (Employment and Skills Formation Council (ESFC), 1991, pp. 30-33).

Concerns expressed by students, teachers and community groups about the impact of commercialisation on TAFE's capacity to respond to individual needs and promote social equity in an industry-driven system were ignored by policy makers. In the latter's view, industry and individual needs were converging due to economic restructuring and workplace reform. For the same reason, it was argued that TAFE would meet its community service obligations (CSOs) more effectively by providing programs and support services 'that closely match industry needs' (ESFC, 1991, p. 34).

But inherent in official policy settings were deep tensions and contradictions. The corporatist nature of an industry-driven system in which employers were defined as the 'principal clients' and 'end-users' of skills sat uneasily beside the emergent framework of market liberalism, with its strong ideological emphasis on individualism, consumer sovereignty and direct relationships between producers and consumers. Mixed and often conflicting messages from government about who constituted TAFE's main clients - industry/enterprises or individual students - only served to confuse matters for providers struggling with multiple pressures and demands to reform themselves:

TAFE must .. service specific industry and enterprise needs .. An effective vocational education system must meet the needs of thousands of individual students, who each year use TAFE to enhance their skills and improve their job prospects. After all, individual students - not industries, not enterprises - enrol in TAFE colleges (ESFC, 1991, p. 18).

Moreover in spite of their important role in facilitating equitable access and participation in TAFE, support services remained undervalued and under-resourced by government (Anderson, in press). In an increasingly devolved TAFE system, government viewed the provision of student services and amenities as a provider responsibility to be managed within institutional budgets according to local priorities.

2.1 TAFE students and student services staff

Unlike their university counterparts, TAFE students remained disorganised and generally unable or unwilling to engage in policy debate or political activism for a variety of reasons (Ministerial Working Party on Student Participation, 1987). Although student organisations had emerged at an institute level in some States and Territories during the 1980s, TAFE students generally lacked effective means by which to communicate with each other and express their views and concerns at a national and State level. The sole exception was the Victorian TAFE Students and Apprentices Network (VTSAN) which, after its formation by a small group of TAFE student unionists in 1987, grew to become the peak body in Victoria representing the interests of TAFE students and apprentices on a statewide basis.

Conversely, successive national and State Governments were disinclined to promote student participation in decision making, consult with students on relevant policy issues, or even acknowledge their status as legitimate stakeholders in TAFE. Since the inception of the training reform agenda around 1989, TAFE students had been invited to participate in national policy consultations on only one occasion, as it happens by the Deveson Review in 1990 (Anderson, 1998a). A national study of client satisfaction with program and service provision was undertaken in 1993, but only graduates, not students currently enrolled in TAFE, were surveyed (Dawe, 1993).

In effect, TAFE students were disenfranchised and powerless to influence policy decisions and agenda-setting processes at a State or national level. But this was not for want of interest or desire on their part. In early 1994, the Education and Student Services Standing Committee (ESSSC) of the National TAFE Chief Executives' Committee (NTCC) commissioned a national survey of 1,934 TAFE students in order, among other things, 'to inform student representatives on (the) National Training Reform Agenda and allow for student input; to facilitate interaction between high level policy makers and the primary client group - namely students; (and) to identify emerging national issues for TAFE students and develop resources' (Hogan, 1994, p. 4). Although at best indicative, the survey findings suggested that TAFE students were neither apathetic nor unclear at the time about the issues which they considered important. Student services were identified as a high priority and 86 per cent of respondents felt that 'student representatives (should) have some input into the decisions made by the national Education and Student Services Standing Committee' (Hogan, 1994, p. 7).

Not unlike their clients, student services staff in TAFE were poorly organised and generally lacked the professional status and relative industrial strength of TAFE teachers. A large and increasing proportion were employed on short-term contracts during the late 1980s and early 1990s due to budgetary pressures; and staff turnover rates were high as a result. In most instances, student services were poorly integrated into TAFE institute policy, planning and program delivery processes. Frequent disinterest on the part of institute management, the absence of career paths, inadequate staff development opportunities, insufficient administrative support, and inferior facilities compounded the low self-esteem of student services staff in TAFE. By and large their access to, and influence on, decision making at a provider level was also extremely limited, as it was at a State and national level.

2.2 TAFE institute directors

Converging with the groundswell of concern about student services among TAFE students and student services staff was mounting pressure from another more powerful interest group. Within the NTCC itself, which at the time was the peak body representing directors of TAFE institutes across Australia, there was considerable disquiet about government demands on them to increase participation rates and meet CSOs without any additional resources. Moreover, the only available growth funds were being allocated via competitive tendering. As a result, TAFE institutes were forced into direct competition for scarce resources with each other, and with private providers who were not obliged to meet CSOs and generally minimised their overheads by economising on, among other things, the provision of student support services (Anderson, 1994).

The confluence of these financial pressures left TAFE directors with no alternative other than to institute radical cost-reduction strategies and seek additional revenue from non-government sources. The impact on student services provision was substantial. Available resources were increasingly directed away from 'non-core' service delivery to 'core' program provision, and the number of student services staff was progressively reduced in an effort to become more price-competitive. In order to maintain minimum levels of student support, TAFE management began to rely more heavily on user payments in the form of general services and amenities fees. Given that a significant proportion of TAFE's student clientele was financially disadvantaged and required access to support services, the social impact of such strategies ran counter to TAFE's mission to promote equity and meet CSOs, for example by providing access for rural and remote communities.

Although rarely voiced in public fora, the frustration of TAFE directors was expressed on one significant occasion by the then chair of the NTCC and Director of Canberra Institute of Technology, Norman Fisher. In a paper delivered to a national conference on the training reform agenda in November 1993, Fisher questioned key assumptions behind government policy. Among other things,

he argued that the emerging framework for the national training market ascribed undue influence and control to industry bodies, while overlooking the needs and interests of two major stakeholder groups. With respect to the first of these two groups, educationally disadvantaged students and geographically isolated communities, Fisher argued that: 'It is as though the obligation to meet the needs of these groups no longer exists or is irrelevant. The downgrading of these obligations has not been addressed by ministers' (1993, p. 29). According to Fisher:

The second group of consumers typically overlooked by advocates of the training market are the students and trainees. Yet not only are most vocational students mature adults but in recent years the growth of revenue from their fees and charges has swamped the direct contributions made by employers to the costs of public vocational education. Thus if consumer sovereignty were to be measured by purchases in cash and kind, students should have a far greater say in training policy, priorities and practices than they presently enjoy (1993, p. 29).

It was in this context of multiple pressures and conflicting interests that the research study under examination was initiated.

3. THE RESEARCH

In 1994, the ESSSC commissioned three national research projects on issues of concern to TAFE students. The ESSSC, a body with representatives from each State and Territory TAFE system, had been established in 1992 with funds provided by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET). Its two main goals and objectives were to 'position education and student services as a key element in the provision of vocational education as defined by the national training reform agenda; and provide leadership and coordination for education and student services'. In addition to providing advice to the NTCC, the ESSSC sought to ensure that 'all levels of planning and delivery of training services are focussed on the student as client; and models, policy framework, principles and practices are developed for the improved provision of student services'. Towards these ends, the ESSSC aimed to monitor client satisfaction, include student services in national and State profiles, promote student participation/consultation, and disseminate best practice (ESSSC, 1994).

The decision to fund the research studies, together with the development of the project briefs, was an outcome of a national student workshop held by the ESSSC in Canberra in October 1993. The workshop had comprised two student representatives from each State and Territory, as well as members of the ESSSC. The final project briefs were presented and accepted at a National Student Services Conference held in Sydney in November 1993 (Hogan, 1994), following which tenders were invited from interested organisations.

One of the research projects was intended to examine student perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the provision of support services and amenities in TAFE. As the successful bidder, VTSAN planned and managed this project through to completion under the broad direction of a national reference group comprising student representatives from all State and Territory TAFE systems. Besides providing advice to VTSAN, the reference group members were responsible for administering a national questionnaire, facilitating focus group interviews with students and student services staff, and compiling preliminary reports on a State-by-State basis. A project officer was employed by VTSAN to coordinate the project and design the questionnaire, and two consultants were contracted to respectively process the survey data and prepare the final report. In effect, the research was primarily conceived, organised and conducted by TAFE students. Although funded 'from above', it was nonetheless an example of VET research 'from below'. This was a unique feature of the research and one which has significant implications for evaluating its impact.

As the principal research consultant contracted by VTSAN, I was responsible for preparing the final report which entailed conducting a literature review, analysing data collected via the national questionnaire and focus group interviews, and writing the final text, including recommendations. My relationship with VTSAN dated back to 1987, at which time I was employed under the Commonwealth Participation and Equity Program as a project officer in the Office of the TAFE Board,

Victoria, with responsibility for developing policy and strategies to promote student participation in decision making. One of these strategies was to facilitate the development of VTSAN.

As previously indicated, the main aim of the ESSSC-funded national study was to examine how effectively TAFE support services and amenities were meeting the needs and priorities of students. The findings were intended to provide the ESSSC with a basis for developing national models and minimum standards for service delivery. Beyond this objective, the study aimed to 'stimulate debate about the principles which should inform student service provision in TAFE and also contribute to more effective planning and targeting of resources at a national, State and local level' (Anderson, 1995, p. xi).

A national survey of 7,000 TAFE students was conducted and 2,339 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 33 per cent. The demographic profile of respondents was broadly representative of the total TAFE student population. Respondents were asked to rate the importance and effectiveness of 67 student services and amenities relating to information, counselling, orientation, child care, learning support, accommodation, health/medical/safety, disabilities, transport, employment, personal and social development, student development, financial assistance, student associations, and student facilities. They were also asked a series of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to elicit views and opinions about ways to improve the quality and effectiveness of service provision. Questionnaire data were supplemented by focus group interviews with a cross-section of TAFE student groups in most States and Territories.

Entitled *Are you being served? Client perspectives on student services and amenities in TAFE* (Anderson, 1995), the final report comprised background information, an analysis of the policy context, a review of relevant literature which focussed on 'current issues and concerns', and a discussion of definitions. The main body of the report analysed the survey findings which were presented in 55 tables, interspersed with short extracts from focus group interviews. The report concluded with a discussion of the main implications of the research findings for policy and practice, a statement of principles for service provision, and an outline of major priorities and strategies for improving service delivery. The report closed with 17 recommendations covering national policy and targets, resources, flexible delivery, information, marketing, quality assurance, client participation, staff development and further research. A brief executive summary highlighted the major findings and their implications at the beginning of the report.

4. MOTIVES AND OBJECTIVES

Before outlining the key research findings and assessing their effects and consequences, it is necessary to indicate what type of impact the funders, project managers and researcher set out to achieve. From both the ESSSC's and VTSAN's perspectives, it was hoped that the research would help to put student services and amenities in TAFE on the official policy agenda of the Federal and State Governments. As previously indicated, the training reform agenda was relatively silent on the issue of student services, shaped as it was by the overriding imperatives to establish an industry-driven system and employer-led training market. There had been only one national review of student services in TAFE (Haigh and Brunner, 1990) and one national report on information, advice and counselling provision (Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee, 1993), neither of which had had any significant impact on national or State policy priorities. Moreover in the relative absence of any prior research at a national or State level, nobody actually knew whether students were satisfied with the range, quality and responsiveness of service provision and amenities in TAFE.

Putting student services and amenities on the government policy agenda was a precondition for achieving other secondary outcomes - specifically the development of national models and minimum standards hoped for by the ESSSC and the increase in government recognition and resources for student services and amenities sought by VTSAN. Beyond exerting some influence on government policy and resource priorities, the ESSSC and VTSAN also hoped to raise the profile of TAFE students in decision-making processes at both the national and State levels. VTSAN was also keen to promote wider acceptance of one of its fundamental policy principles: 'student control of student affairs'. From VTSAN's perspective, this principle was directly relevant to the area of student services provision and

implied the right of students and their representative campus-based organisations to manage the revenue collected via general services and amenities fees.

As the principal researcher, I sought to produce a high quality, comprehensive and accessible report which not only accurately reflected the views and opinions of students who participated in the survey and focus group interviews, but which also drew out the major implications of the research findings for policy makers, managers, practitioners and students themselves. Beyond these objectives, however, I sought to interrogate and problematise the official policy frame and its underlying assumptions so as to reveal some of the reasons *why* and *how* the issue of student services and amenities had been subordinated to other policy concerns. Such an approach was reflective of my location as an academic researcher with a commitment to giving students a voice on issues that directly affect them, and promoting critical reflection on the values, interests and assumptions that shape and inform official policy.

As a consequence, there was a relatively high degree of correspondence or complementarity between the funder's, project manager's and researcher's objectives. All parties wished to raise awareness of student services and amenities in TAFE as a central policy issue, improve responsiveness to students' needs, and promote the participation of students in decision making at all levels of the TAFE system.

5. WHAT THE REPORT SAID

Are you being served? could be loosely categorised as a hybrid form of critical policy analysis and empirical research which, in combination, were used as a medium for policy advocacy on behalf of the research subjects. How was this effect achieved? To a large extent, the survey findings spoke for themselves. Overall, the national survey results showed that student services and amenities were rated as 'very important' or 'important' by a large majority of respondents. However, respondents considered service provision to be generally ineffective and unresponsive to their needs and preferences. Only two per cent of respondents reported having experienced 'no problems' with support services. In short, the level of student dissatisfaction with the provision of support services and amenities in TAFE was found to be consistently high, with some exceptions.

The survey findings most commonly cited by other parties since the report's release are those which reflect students' opinions about three key issues, as follows:

- 21 per cent of all respondents (and 30 per cent of those with special needs) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the statement that 'without the help of student services I may have dropped out of my course';
- 63 per cent of respondents 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the statement that 'the college should provide more resources (funding and staff) to student services'; and
- 66 per cent of respondents 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the statement that 'student union representatives should have a say in what services are provided for students'.

In the report's examination of the research implications, emphasis was placed on the need for greater responsiveness to the diverse needs and priorities of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A national framework for service provision comprising national models, minimum standards and benchmarks for the delivery of high quality services was proposed. Although the setting of targets for service provision at a State level was recommended, it was argued that planning and resource allocation is best undertaken at a regional and local level. The report recommended that support services be fully costed and funded as an integral element of program delivery, and that additional resources be allocated to the provision of financial assistance, health, medical and safety services, student association services, student facilities and employment services. Attention was drawn to the need for considerable improvement in careers advice and job placement services, and in the provision of learning support, child care and disabilities support for students with special needs.

Other recommendations were made concerning service delivery, including the need for after-hours access for part-time students; resource sharing and client referral on a regional and local basis; and a greater reliance on student-generated media (e.g. posters and diaries) to inform students about the existence of support services. More systematic monitoring of student needs and client satisfaction was

recommended, as was increased student participation in the planning, management and evaluation of service provision. Other proposals addressed the need for marketing strategies to promote the availability and benefits of student services and amenities in TAFE, and for staff training in customer focus and service management. The report recommended the development of a code of practice for service providers and a charter of consumer rights based on nine principles: accessibility, confidentiality, efficiency, equity, flexibility, integration, participation, quality, and responsiveness. Finally, the report highlighted the need for further research on the costs and benefits of student support services in TAFE from a social and economic perspective.

The research findings and recommendations were framed within a critical analysis of official policy settings and their implications for students, both as users of student services and amenities in TAFE, and as clients in the emergent training market. As previously indicated, this analysis aimed to identify the reasons why and how services provision and student participation in decision making had been downgraded as policy priorities in recent years. Historical shifts in the official policy frame for TAFE since the Kangan report (1974) were examined and critical research literature on the social and educational impact of the training reform agenda was reviewed. In the light of this analysis, the report argued that the combined effects of economic rationalism and corporate managerialism had led to a redefinition of student services as 'non-core' activities and of students as passive consumers of, rather than active participants in, TAFE. In the light of the survey findings, these trends were shown to have had adverse consequences not only for students as learners and stakeholders, but also for the realisation of official policy objectives. For instance, it was argued that:

Unless higher priority and sufficient resources are allocated to student services and amenities in the VET system, skills formation will be less efficient and effective, increasing numbers of students with special needs will be placed at risk, and the system as a whole will produce higher rates of student attrition and resource wastage (Anderson, 1995, p. x).

Moreover, by defining student services as a potential 'competitive advantage' rather than a cost to providers, it was argued that financial management practices in TAFE institutes were undermining their capacity to compete more effectively in the training market. Of all the conclusions reached in *Are you being served?*, these two have figured most prominently in subsequent debate about the implications of the research for policy and practice.

An analysis of the aforementioned tensions and contradictions between corporatism and market liberalism in official policy discourse provided the basis for challenging the subordination of 'individuals' to 'industry' and the consequent marginalisation of students as legitimate participants in decision making. Students were then repositioned as the principal 'users' and 'consumers' of VET programs and services in the light of official data which showed that the collective financial contribution to TAFE by individuals was much greater than that of industry, a strategy that had been previously suggested by Fisher (1993). Market logic was also used to contend that:

To the extent that students are now obliged to pay for services provided by TAFE, they are equally entitled to expect a minimum level and standard of service provision. Consumer rights .. are the flipside of 'user pays' (Anderson, 1995, p. x).

By adopting this approach, together with a brief discussion of the ethical grounds for prioritising educational over commercial goals in TAFE, alternative possibilities were suggested for reframing support services provision and student participation in decision making as central policy objectives for TAFE.

In summary, *Are you being served?* communicated eight key messages as follows:

- student services and amenities support the educational development and welfare of TAFE students;
- support services provision should therefore be viewed as a core component of program delivery;
- provision of high quality student services promotes equity *and* efficiency in VET;

- student services and amenities constitute a potential, but as yet unrealised, competitive advantage for TAFE;
- for the latter two reasons, cost-cutting strategies which target student services and amenities are myopic and potentially counterproductive;
- individual students (rather than industry or enterprises) are the principal clients of TAFE, from both a commercial and educational perspective;
- as a consequence, TAFE (and government) has an obligation to recognise the rights of students-as-consumers and respond to their needs and priorities; and
- student participation in decision making is both a democratic right and a means by which to ensure more effective outcomes.

After outlining how the research was disseminated, the extent to which its messages and recommendations influenced decision making at various levels within the VET sector will then be examined.

6. WHERE DID THE REPORT GO?

The final report was submitted to the ESSSC for consideration and endorsement in late 1995. After some minor technical revisions, the report was forwarded to the NTCC, following which 2,000 copies were printed and distributed to all State training authorities, other relevant government agencies (e.g. National Centre for Vocational Education Research), all providers whose staff and student organisations had participated in the study, and other interested individuals and organisations. State training authorities were asked to send copies to all TAFE institutes within their respective jurisdictions. However, as one informant noted, 'I do not think it went to ANTA but if it did, it was purely for noting' (personal correspondence).

In order to disseminate the research widely, and thereby to enhance its potential impact, I prepared a number of articles on the research findings during 1996 for publication in various professional and academic journals, including *Campus Review*, *Australian Training Review*, *Education Australia*, *Training agenda: a journal of vocational education and training* (Anderson, 1996a,b,c, 1997a) and more recently the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research* (Anderson, in press). I also presented papers at various conferences and seminars attended by policy makers, practitioners, students and academic researchers. Some of the key themes of *Are you being served?* were revisited in a keynote address I delivered at the 4th National TAFE Student Services Conference in Sydney in October 1998 (Anderson, 1998b). None of these products of the research process were identical. Each was intentionally customised to varying degrees in an effort to engage as directly as possible with the particular interests and perspectives of the expected readership or audience. Various research findings and their implications for policy, planning and practice were selectively emphasised and recontextualised by drawing upon different aspects of the discursive frame constructed in the final research report.

Due to space constraints, the final report did not record or analyse the whole body of survey data. In view of the importance attached to careers advice and job placement services by survey respondents, I subsequently prepared a separate working paper which analysed relevant survey results in greater depth and explored their implications for policy and practice (Anderson, 1997b). Some time later, I revised the working paper for publication in the *Australian Journal of Career Development* (Anderson, 1997c).

7. EFFECTS

The impact of research on decision making can be conceptualised and evaluated from several viewpoints. There can be *first order effects*, wherein the explicit recommendations of a research report are endorsed for implementation, and *second order effects*, wherein new perspectives or understandings are generated, which may in turn influence decisions relating to policy, planning and practice. First order effects are likely to be relatively easy to identify, whereas second order effects may be more diffuse and intangible, although just as important. For example, the reconceptualisation and

representation of a policy issue may produce a shift in the dominant discursive and linguistic frames that constitute official policy, planning and practice. But the influence of the research may not be readily identifiable.

A piece of research may have *short-run effects* in the sense that it has an immediate impact on the criteria used to inform policy, planning and practice. Or it may have *long-run effects*, such as contributing to an incremental process of knowledge building and awareness raising, the impact of which may be discernible only over an extended period of time. Similarly, a piece of research may have *discrete* or *cumulative effects* according to whether it influences decision making in its own right or in conjunction with other complementary research. Research may have *upstream* and/or *downstream effects* depending on a range of factors, including the perceived status of the research, who authorises it, who gains access to it, who uses it to inform their decisions, and who is subsequently affected by those decisions.

Research can also have *hegemonic* or *counter-hegemonic effects* according to the extent to which it affirms or negates the dominant values, assumptions and interests around which official policy, planning and practice are organised. Similarly, the process of research can have *disempowering* or *empowering effects*, depending on the degree to which the research subjects are treated as passive objects of decision making or are given the scope to actively shape the research agenda, determine which questions are important, and thereby use the research as a means by which to influence decision making in their interests.

In short, there are many different axes along which the impact of research on decision making can be evaluated, if not measured. The above taxonomy of research effects, although by no means exhaustive, will be used as a framework for evaluating the impact of *Are you being served?* on decision making in VET. In doing so, research is viewed not only as a product, but also as a process involving a number of participants, both research subjects and agents of the research process. Where possible, the impact of the research on participants will be addressed.

The following evaluation of research impact also adopts a vertical and horizontal perspective on decision making in VET. This approach enables the impact of the research to be examined both at various hierarchical or 'official' levels of decision making - national, State and local - and at a grassroots or 'unofficial' level among informal stakeholder groups, specifically student services staff and students. It also recognises the interactive relationship between these two 'separate' domains of decision making, a relationship mediated by power relations. Implicit in this approach is a rejection of 'rational' models of decision making which privilege structures and processes authorised by the State, and ignore the extent to which 'official' decisions are in reality the product of complex and contested social processes involving conflict over meanings, values and interests (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry, 1997).

7.1 National impact

The impact of the report at a national level is difficult to ascertain, although it seems to have been almost negligible. When first received by the ESSSC for consideration, the final report stimulated considerable internal debate about its critique of official policy and management practices and their adverse impact on student services in TAFE. After initial opposition from some ESSSC members, the report was eventually endorsed and forwarded to the NTCC, but only 'for noting' and 'with advice that it was a student report and that it did not have to be agreed to as it did not necessarily have policy implications' (informant 1, personal correspondence, emphases added). The framing of *Are you being served?* as 'a student report' was probably sufficient to undermine its status as a noteworthy piece of research in the eyes of national policy makers and TAFE institute directors. No doubt the accompanying rider confirmed its insignificance and ensured that it would be ignored at a national level.

Regardless of this negative characterisation, the report's potential impact at a national level was defused by changes in the status of the NTCC. As one informant observed:

...there was little pressure to do anything significant with it. At the time it went to the NTCC, they were being superseded by (the) ANTA CEOs and there was little real interest left in the NTCC or the ESSSC ...I do not think it went to ANTA but if it did, it was purely for noting (informant 2, personal correspondence).

Such circumstantial factors effectively cancelled out the prospect of the report having any first order effects at a national level. As one former ESSSC member observed, the dismantling of the committee when its budget expired in 1996 meant that 'the national focus (on student services in TAFE) fell into a hole' (informant 3, personal correspondence).

One possible indicator of second order effects at a national level is whether or not the discursive and linguistic frames of national policy underwent any subsequent changes. Prior to the report's release, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) had not deviated from its stance that the VET sector should become more responsive to 'the needs of industry as the *principal client*' (ANTA, 1994, foreword, emphasis added). While not denying the relevance of learners' needs, ANTA (following the Employment and Skills Formation Council [ESFC]) had consistently asserted that the needs of individual students were converging with those of industry, and that the former would be best accommodated by satisfying the latter. However, some months after the release of *Are you being served?*, ANTA modified its position:

Fundamentally *enterprises are the key clients of the training market* ...A client focus is important since enterprises are the end users of skills acquired through training and must ultimately be satisfied with the results. *Individual students are, of course, the immediate clients of training providers*. Their needs may differ from those of enterprises. *Any reform will need to account for the potentially competing demands of client groups* (ANTA, 1996, p. 7, emphases added).

As reflected in this excerpt from a policy discussion paper issued by ANTA in December 1996, a subtle yet significant shift had occurred in official policy discourse. Not only were 'individual students' recognised alongside 'enterprises' as 'clients', albeit as 'the immediate clients of training providers', but there was also an unprecedented acknowledgment from ANTA that the needs of enterprises and individual clients do not necessarily coincide, and may in fact conflict. Such a redefinition was broadly consistent with the position argued in *Are you being served?* that 'the primary client or front-line consumer of VET programs and services is the individual student', and that their needs may differ significantly from those of industry and enterprises (Anderson, 1995, executive summary, p. ix).

Both changes in official policy discourse represented important concessions to the growing body of critics who had argued during 1995 that ANTA's prior definition was excessively narrow, unbalanced and inconsistent with both market realities and economic theory (see, for example, Fooks, 1995 and Ryan, 1995). While the precise impact of the ESSSC report is unclear, it amplified the chorus of dissent by expressing similar views from a student perspective. To this extent, it may have had a cumulative and countervailing impact on official policy frames at a national level.

7.2 State impact

The report was widely distributed to senior TAFE management at the State and Territory level. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the research 'created a climate of awareness among some senior managers in head office' about issues relating to student services in TAFE (informant 4, personal correspondence). According to the same informant, the key to the report's influence was that it showed central and provider management 'the reverse side of the coin, the clients' perspective'. In another State, the report was said to have generated greater acceptance at a senior level of the status of students as legitimate stakeholders and participants in decision making: 'there is finally a commitment from the top that we will have a student voice whether institutes want it or not' (personal correspondence).

Although none of the report's recommendations appear to have been implemented in their original form, the research contributed to a process of organisational reform with short-run, downstream effects in at least one State TAFE system:

...the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) thought the report was highly significant and ensured that a copy was given to each Director and each Student Services Manager in the TAFE institutes. It was an agenda item at the (meeting of the) Directors of TAFE institutes and they all thought some attention should be given to customer needs. No State policy was established as a result, although the report was influential in restructuring student service positions in institutes ...The first student satisfaction survey was also developed as a result of the report (informant 2, personal correspondence).

Overall, however, informants suggest that the increased attention paid to student service issues at a State level in 1996 was not a discrete outcome of *Are you being served?*, but rather the cumulative effect of a series of reports emanating from the ESSSC at around the same time. As one informant observed, *Are you being served?* was only 'one input among many' (informant 3, personal correspondence). The idea that the impact of research occurs through a process of accretion is also conveyed in the following exchange with another key informant (KI):

DA: Has *Are you being served?* helped to raise the profile of student services as a key vehicle for responding to student-client needs?

KI: Yes, but not by itself, rather as part of a series of very good reports that all address aspects of student needs and appropriate planning.

In Victoria, consideration of the research findings, alongside those of other ESSSC reports, led to a series of workshops about student services provision which involved both central and provider staff. This resulted in the production of a discussion paper on 'good practice' in student services provision entitled *Move ahead with TAFE: framework for the delivery of services to students* (OTFE, 1997). Although the discussion paper superseded *Are you being served?* as the 'vehicle to influence the agenda' at both a central and provider level in Victoria (informant 5, personal correspondence), the discussion paper was nonetheless 'a grandchild of *Are you being served?*' (informant 4, personal correspondence). The imprint of *Are you being served?* is evident in the emphasis given to the discourse of 'rights' and the principle of student participation in decision making in the discussion paper:

Those involved in Student Services should have input into the development of institute policy and be included in key policy and planning forums to ensure the rights and interests of students are recognised at all levels. Applications of this principle are:

- the inclusion of student representatives and student service staff as members of Institute committees
- the input by student service staff to policy development ...
- access to complaint and grievance procedures by students
- avenues of advocacy and mediation available to students

(OTFE, 1997, p. 11).

The inclusion of this principle in an official government document represents an important strategic outcome of *Are you being served?*, and attests to the potential for research to provide otherwise disenfranchised groups with a vehicle for policy advocacy. The extent to which the principle has been translated into practice, however, is difficult to ascertain as subsequent implementation was left to the discretion of individual TAFE institutes.

Coincidentally in December 1996, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office released a special report entitled *Vocational education and training: a client perspective*, the purpose of which was 'to examine the provision of vocational education and training within the State Training System in order to assess whether it had been effective in terms of meeting the training needs of student and industry clients'

(Auditor-General of Victoria, 1996, p. 23). The report was a meta-evaluation of the findings of a national graduate destination survey (ABS, 1996), a national employer satisfaction survey (AGB McNair, 1996), and *Are you being served?* Key findings and recommendations from *Are you being served?* were cited, specifically the need to recognise the crucial role and contribution of support services to student development; increase government funding of support services and amenities; develop national frameworks and targets for service provision; and increase student participation in decisions concerning support services and amenities. The Auditor-General recommended that 'With a view to implementing action plans to address areas of concern, institutes in conjunction with the OTFE should carefully examine the findings of the report' (Auditor-General of Victoria, 1996, p. 41). The development of the good practices discussion paper by OTFE was also endorsed.

Released almost one year after *Are you being served?*, by which time its initial impact at a State level had largely subsided, the Auditor-General's report reactivated the research and served as a vehicle to reinforce and further disseminate some of its key messages. Moreover, the Auditor-General's unqualified recognition of TAFE students as 'key clients' conferred legitimacy on the counter-hegemonic frame of *Are you being served?* to an extent not otherwise apparent at an official level in the VET sector. The influence of this perspective was evident in the Auditor-General's proposal that performance evaluation in TAFE should in future adopt a 'bottom-up approach' based on 'indicators from the perspective of current students and graduates (which) could include ..adequacy of teaching services, materials, equipment and student support services and amenities' (pp. 59 and 61).

Consultations with officers from other State Training Authorities (STAs) suggest that the research was influential in policy and planning processes at that level, although its impact was variable and often overshadowed by prevailing political imperatives. One STA officer reported that *Are you being served?* stimulated 'people ...to ask more questions about career services in TAFE' (informant 6, personal correspondence). As a consequence, the STA restructured and renamed its former TAFE counselling services division to include careers advisory services. This decision had downstream effects in that several TAFE institutes subsequently established graduate job placement services where none had previously existed. However, an STA officer from a different State indicated that:

..some changes have been implemented that coincide with the findings of the report but (they) are more as a result of political drivers than the findings of the report. For example ..employment officers have been hired but that is because we have very high levels of unemployment and we want to impress the government that we are doing something to make the government look better (informant 2, personal correspondence).

Elsewhere the report has been used in conjunction with a subsequent working paper (Anderson, 1997b) and journal article (Anderson, 1997c) to justify and inform the development of a statewide and cross-sectoral policy on careers advice and counselling for post-compulsory education and training students (informant 1, personal correspondence). In two States, the report's recommendation relating to professional development led to the implementation of training programs for middle management and staff involved in service provision.

7.3 Provider and practitioner impact

As previously indicated, a short questionnaire about the impact of the research at a provider level was distributed to a random sample of student service managers and staff in TAFE institutes in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. Twenty-one of the 26 respondents said that they were 'aware' of the report. Of these 21 respondents, six said that they had read 'all parts' of the report, 14 had read 'some parts', and one said 'no parts'. Nine respondents, five of whom had read 'all parts' of the report, were responsible for managing other student services staff.

Fourteen respondents said that the research findings had been discussed and considered at their institutes, primarily by student service managers and staff. Nine respondents said that the report had influenced policy and planning decisions at the institute level. Although 'its main concepts and findings have certainly influenced discussion about student service policy', the report appears to have had limited impact on senior management. One respondent suggested that the report was 'not

accepted at management level due to economic rationalist constraints'. Another said that management was 'too concerned about the economics of education' with the result that policy and planning decisions were 'dollar-driven' rather than research-based. An indication of the report's negligible impact on management priorities was that the number of student services staff in one TAFE institute had been 'much diminished since the release of the report - 21 reduced to 12!!'. Another respondent reported that even after the senior executive group at her institute had formally discussed the research, 'major funding cuts have seen a reduction in both human and physical resources at the ... Institute of TAFE Client Services Unit'.

The research was used more widely by student services management and staff who variously described the report as 'a valuable tool which was long overdue', a 'signpost' which 'gave direction and answers', and an 'essential resource for new staff'. In part such responses reflected the general absence of research, particularly of an evaluative nature, on student services provision in TAFE. As the head of a careers counselling department stated, 'I felt like a person in the desert who had finally found the waterhole - having an informative well-presented report with data on student services was terrific'. Another informant indicated that 'student services staff were certainly affected by the report - it was used as "proof" that we really did contribute to successful outcomes' (personal correspondence). Respondents indicated that they used the research in a variety of ways and for several purposes, for example: for 'improving the ad hoc nature of what is available', for 'developing long-term goals and future staff development'; 'to develop change management competencies'; to raise 'awareness of the need for employment services'; 'to develop graduate employment services'; to 'emphasise job-related/vocational needs'; to 'improve front counter focus'; and 'for (minor) marketing purposes' in an institute's prospectus.

Fourteen respondents said that the report had influenced their own attitudes and understanding of issues concerning student services. Several said it had 'reinforced' or 'confirmed' their prior convictions that student services perform an important role in supporting access and participation. One respondent felt that it had 'reaffirmed the value of our core services' while another said it 'gave credence to what we do (and) helped justify the existence of student services'. Others replied that it had improved their understanding of student needs and assisted them to prioritise their own and/or their department's work activities more effectively. Ten respondents said the report had also changed their approach to providing student services, for example by convincing them to adopt a more active and strategic approach to information provision, student orientation programs, academic and careers counselling, student referral and follow-up, and monitoring the quality and effectiveness of service provision through client satisfaction surveys. Another reported that it had led to 'a greater focus on outcomes'.

Besides leading to specific changes in services provision, however, the research appears to have stimulated a process of critical reflection and, in a few cases, political action among practitioners - both individually and to some extent collectively through statewide networks of student services staff. As suggested by comments cited above, the research raised awareness of the contextual forces which shape and constrain the provision of student service provision in TAFE. The discourse of 'consumer rights' in the report appears to have engendered a new understanding of the status of students in the context of a training market. As one respondent stated, the research had 'reinforced the notion that a broad range of services are a right that students have'. For others, the report was instrumental in raising their awareness of the value of student participation and representation, and of the advocacy and support roles they could assume as student service officers. Three respondents said that they had used the research separately to 'resuscitate student bodies on campuses', to 'assist students to approach management', and to 'lobby management for extra services'. Another felt that the research had been strategically important as it helped 'to get student agenda up there with the other big players, that is industry, government and institutions'.

These survey responses confirm the assessment of one STA officer that 'the report has been used, certainly ..by practitioners' (personal correspondence). But while the research initiated and informed decisions at both an individual and departmental level, its influence on policy and planning decisions at an institute level was relatively limited. When asked about the overall impact of the report on decision making at their institutes, only three respondents said that it had been 'significant', nine said that it had been 'minor', one said that it had had no impact whatsoever, while eight said they didn't

know. As the survey responses cited above suggest, resource constraints and senior management attitudes appear to have been the main impediments to wider use of the research in decision making at an institute level. As one survey respondent suggested, 'the lack of impact of the report seems to reflect the low priority given to the provision of adequate resources for support services in this era of restructuring and cost-cutting'. By implication, the survey responses also suggest that the impact of the research at an institute level was diminished by the relative powerlessness of student services staff in provider-based decision-making processes.

7.4 Student impact

As stated earlier, *Are you being served?* was the product of a research project conceived, developed and managed by TAFE students on the basis of widespread consultation about major issues of concern to TAFE students. In many respects, it was conducted *for* TAFE students as much as to inform decision makers at an official level. From this perspective, its impact can be assessed in terms of the extent to which it became both a vehicle and resource for students to influence decision making in TAFE. As the coordinator of VTSAN, Maurice Sibelle, states:

Are you being served? did a lot to quantify what we had suspected about student needs and opinions about the services provided to students at TAFE colleges throughout Australia .. *Are you being served?* is the only research that is readily available on student perspectives on student services and amenities in TAFE. As such it is an invaluable resource .. Many of the widely held beliefs of .. student organisations could now be backed up by concrete facts and figures (personal correspondence).

Given the prior dearth of such research, the release of the report generated widespread interest and discussion among TAFE student organisations in Victoria, as it did among the student services staff whom they employed:

The report has been in great demand ... There was a real discussion among student organisations about the report. Most (student union) staff were clamouring for copies and we got many calls from student services staff employed by management and student organisations enquiring about the report (Sibelle, personal correspondence).

The research strongly influenced decisions regarding service planning and provision by student organisations in Victoria. Significantly, more of the report's specific recommendations for improving service provision appear to have been implemented by student organisations than by TAFE institutes. This suggests that the first order effects of the research have been greatest in domains where students exercise a higher degree of influence over decision making.

Sibelle states that 'The report helped orient a few organisations in the delivery of their services'. In addition to encouraging a greater reliance on posters and diaries to inform students about available services, student organisations also drew on the report's recommendations to develop strategies which respond in a more flexible and equitable manner to the identified needs and preferences of part-time and disadvantaged students:

After hours services have .. been a major focus of many of our student organisations. At Peninsula and Barton the figures on after hours services were used to justify the restructuring of staffing and office hours to allow the student organisations to be more accessible to all students. This has been a very successful exercise with many students being pleasantly surprised to find their student organisation open in the evenings .. Figures on minority groups and women have also assisted student organisations in developing programs for students. There is a greater awareness and an attempt to meet the needs of students with disabilities, women, Aborigines, overseas students and other groups of students (Sibelle, personal correspondence).

The research findings have also influenced the processes and strategies which student organisations use to communicate with their constituencies, promote their services, and represent students' interests at an institute level. Due to the research findings:

It has become more generally recognised that word of mouth is one of the most important ways that we can get information out to students and VTSAN is developing a campaigning kit which focusses more on class talks as a way of informing students about issues and getting students involved in their organisation ...The report was also used by student organisations to show how student organisations can be an effective strategy for improving retention rates at colleges. It helped student organisations to identify the most important services that students needed and while the organisations may not have been able to provide those services it helped students argue for and justify these services on college committees (Sibelle, personal correspondence).

Such applications suggest that the research had significant empowering effects among student organisations in the sense that it provided them with a tool for influencing official policy and resource decisions. At a more general level, it also appears to have been a catalyst for critical reflection on the nature of official policy frames and their implications for students. As Sibelle confirms, the research not only 'increased student awareness of how recent government reforms have impacted on student services' but also 'helped students to realise they have rights as "consumers"'.

It is at this level that the impact of the research as a process, not simply a product, must also be considered. As a process, the research project provided a vehicle for facilitating debate at the provider level on policy issues relating to student services provision. As Sibelle states, 'it stimulated educated and informed discussion about the delivery of student services and the provision of amenities, particularly among staff in student organisations and in student service departments'. Student participation in, and management of, the research process may have also produced some positive long-run effects in so far as student organisations in Victoria are concerned. In this regard, the research process 'raised the profile of VTSAN and TAFE student organisations in general' and 'increased their confidence to manage research projects and consultations and ..influence policy debate' (Sibelle, personal correspondence).

The above assessment of the report's impact on TAFE students must be put into context. It is based on anecdotal evidence provided by one informant who represents the only existing statewide TAFE student organisation in Australia. TAFE student organisations are also more widespread, autonomous and better resourced in Victoria than in other States, where they exist at all. For instance, in another State where student organisations are relatively sparse, the impact of the research was far more limited:

Student groups were told about the report and some of them quoted from it at forums - it was well known. However, the student profile ..is mainly part time/short courses so it is difficult to obtain continuity of ideas and drive - especially when there is no central support (informant 2, personal correspondence).

The fact that the research had less impact on TAFE students outside Victoria is not a reflection on its relevance and usefulness. Rather it is a direct consequence of the general lack of decision-making structures and processes through which TAFE students can express their views and represent their interests. Thus, although the Victorian experience was almost certainly unrepresentative, it suggests that the impact of the research among TAFE students may have been more widespread had mechanisms such as VTSAN existed elsewhere. This realisation brings us back full circle to one of the original justifications for the research, this being the need to provide a voice for a key interest group that was, and remains, otherwise excluded from official decision-making processes in TAFE and VET in general.

8. EVALUATION OF RESEARCH IMPACT

The foregoing examination of the impact of *Are you being served?* suggests that the research produced a series of chain reactions of varying depth, intensity and duration at different levels of decision making in the VET sector. At a national level, the impact of the research was negligible. The research may have had a countervailing influence on the manner in which students and their needs were framed in official policy discourse. But if this was so, its impact was cumulative rather than discrete and can only be inferred from circumstantial evidence. The lack of any first order effects at a national level can be explained in part by the negative framing of *Are you being served?* as 'a student report' and the inferior status which it was assigned as a report 'for noting', rather than for action. This reflects not only a deeply ingrained paternalism towards students in TAFE, but also a profound sensitivity towards research which questions the legitimacy of official policy settings and challenges the dominant interests, values and assumptions that shape decision making in VET. Moreover, given that responsiveness to student needs was pre-constructed as a 'provider responsibility' rather than a policy problem *per se*, it is not surprising that national VET authorities were disinterested in the research.

Are you being served? and subsequent publications exerted a more potent and direct influence on decision making at a State and provider level. In some States, the report contributed to a growing recognition of students as 'key clients' alongside industry, and an increased awareness of the important role performed by TAFE support services in meeting student needs. In at least two States, the research partly initiated and informed organisational reviews which involved the partial restructuring and reprioritisation of support service delivery. Similar processes occurred at a local level. Although most effort was directed towards improving careers advice and job placement services, greater attention (but not funding) was also paid to the broad spectrum of student support services.

The report was widely discussed in the context of policy and planning processes at an institute level. Overall, however, decisions based on, or informed by, the research produced at best only incremental change in management practices and marginal shifts in resource allocation priorities at a provider level. Contextual factors such as institutional inertia and the fiscal imperatives of government also conspired to dampen initial enthusiasm. As an STA officer observed, despite a strong commitment at a senior level to improve the quality and responsiveness of student services provision in TAFE, 'implementing a cultural change in the organisation is a slow and tedious process and the continual pressures of competition and budget cuts have a depressing effect' (personal correspondence).

Arguably the report made its greatest, and potentially most enduring, impact at an unofficial level among student services staff and, at least in Victoria, student organisations. Not only was the research used as a resource for informing changes in policy, planning and practice among these groups, but it was also employed as a tool for professional development, critical reflection and, to some extent, policy advocacy. Involvement in the research process also appears to have increased the willingness and capacity of students and their representative organisations to both agitate for a role in formal decision-making processes and influence official policy debate.

The impact of the research was affected by several factors, many of which were beyond the control of the researchers. Timing was important to the extent that the final report was released in a context of debate about whose needs TAFE should be serving and how they should be met. Conversely, the potential impact of *Are you being served?* may have been partially diminished by its unavoidable release at a time when both the NTCC and ESSSC were being disbanded. In this regard, however, the timing of the report's release may not have been so crucial, as neither the NTCC nor its ESSSC exercised any direct influence over national policy settings which, as Taylor and Henry (1994) point out, had already been 'stitched up' by the corporate interests of government, big business and unions. Moreover, the ESSSC had minimal, if any, legitimacy in the eyes of ANTA as it was an initiative funded by a competing Federal Government agency, DEET, and as such was viewed as a product of an unwarranted territorial incursion. In effect, the ESSSC was seen as only one among many 'pressure groups' which in this instance could be safely ignored as it spoke largely on behalf of two relatively powerless constituencies: student services staff and students.

Despite its lack of official endorsement at a national level, wide dissemination of the research through a variety of media ensured that it reached interested parties involved at all other levels of decision making in VET. While the large production runs of *Are you being served?* helped in this regard, so too did the subsequent journal articles and working papers. However, the fact that around one-quarter of the student services staff surveyed for this case study, and an unknown number of TAFE students, were unaware of the research highlights a major difficulty confronted by researchers in VET: how to ensure that their work reaches relevant audiences at all levels of policy, planning and practice in a highly fragmented and stratified sector.

Assuming that all TAFE institutes received copies of the report, there appears to have been a significant communication gap at the provider level in some cases. The unsolicited requests for copies of the report by two of the five survey respondents who had said they were 'unaware' of its existence suggests that the impact of the research on practice may have been greater had more practitioners and their clients been informed about, and given access to, the report. Moreover, as one informant noted, 'we do not even provide students with a means for communicating with each other easily' (personal correspondence). This highlights the need for researchers to actively seek and exploit existing staff and student networks for dissemination purposes, or alternatively create new ones, in order to overcome the lack of formal communication channels at a local level.

The accessibility and relevance of the research in conceptual and linguistic terms was undoubtedly a crucial factor in determining whether or not it was widely read and understood. As the responses from student services staff and student organisations attest, a major reason for the research's impact at this level was that it connected with, made sense of, and gave expression to their various circumstances and experiences to a hitherto unprecedented degree (see, for example, Osmond, 1998). But while it was a source of affirmation for practitioners and students alike, it was also a 'valuable resource for improving service planning and delivery' and in some instances a tool for client advocacy at the local level. In the latter respect, the research permitted readings that were alternatively hegemonic and counter-hegemonic in character. For instance, student services provision could be interpreted in the light of the research as either a 'competitive advantage' for TAFE institutes or a 'democratic right' of TAFE students. Either way, the logical inference was that student services provision should be viewed as part of TAFE's 'core' business and should therefore attract greater recognition and funding.

The perceived quality of the research methodology and analysis influenced the degree of significance attached to the research findings. From the perspective of one student services manager, the report had influenced her thinking because 'it was professional, informed reading' (personal correspondence). Although one informant indicated that 'there was some discussion about its validity because of the small sample size', the report appears to have been generally accepted because 'it contained valid interpretations of the data' (personal correspondence). In a context of 'performativity' or upwards accountability against measurable efficiency criteria (Lyotard, 1984), the inclusion of 'hard data' about client satisfaction with service provision was also seen to enhance the report's value as a resource for influencing decisions. However, given the general lack of statistical skills among readers, an important factor that increased the report's impact was that 'it told them what the data meant' (informant 2, personal correspondence). In other words, reporting of the raw data by themselves would have probably had limited, if any, impact. Contextualisation and interpretation of the data ensured that the research's implications for policy, planning and practice were understood in ways that helped readers to reflect and act strategically.

Other seemingly mundane factors were significant. As one informant stated, 'the title of the report was one of its outstanding features as it grabbed their attention and nobody could afford to discount the findings' (informant 2, personal correspondence). Considerable thought had been put into constructing a catchy title. Apart from being a parody of official market rhetoric, the title *Are you being served? Client perspectives on student services and amenities in TAFE* both captured the user-focussed nature of the research exercise itself and linguistically repositioned students as the key clients. If nothing else, as one STA officer quipped, 'who could forget it with that fluorescent orange cover?' (informant 4, personal correspondence). Impact, after all, can take many forms.

9. CONCLUSION

It is premature to assess the long-run effects of the research as it is barely more than three years since *Are you being served?* was first released. One indicator of the report's ongoing relevance, if not impact, is the fact that it was reprinted in its entirety in July 1996 (after the initial print run of 2,000 copies in December 1995) and, due to ongoing interest and demand, was republished again in an abridged form in September 1998. The report also appears to have become a key reference and building block for other researchers. Attesting to the cumulative impact of the research, a number of studies commissioned and later published by the ESSSC cited the report in their literature reviews and, to some extent, adopted the perspectives and positions developed therein (see, for example, ESSSC, 1995, 1996). It has also been cited in a statewide review of student services provision in South Australia (Coombes, 1997) and in recent conference papers by STA officers (see, for example, Burrows, 1998).

While the specific research content of *Are you being served?* may have partly outlived its shelf life, its discursive and linguistic frames continue to resonate with some significance for the direct providers and users of student services and amenities. As Sibelle reports, 'even today in 1999 I still hear people referring to it and I have had requests for copies of the report' (personal correspondence). The 4th National TAFE Student Services Conference held at Sydney Institute of TAFE in October 1998 echoed some of the central themes of *Are you being served?*, thus suggesting that the report continues to shape and inform debate among student services practitioners:

With resources for VET provision being allocated on a competitive basis, to public and private providers, it can be argued that TAFE more than ever needs to focus on the needs and concerns of its *principal client base: individual students. Ensuring that students have the access and support necessary to achieve their individual and vocational goals is central to client satisfaction and a competitive advantage* (conference brochure, emphasis added).

Thus, although the research may have been 'lost in action' at most official levels of decision making in the VET sector, as one key informant suggested, it continues to provide both student services staff and students with a lens through which to make sense of their lived experiences, strategies for practical improvement and self-empowerment, and discursive positions from which to advocate for change.

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DOING RESEARCH: TALKING POLICY. THE CASE OF EQUITY AND VET

Elaine Butler and Fran Ferrier¹

1. INTRODUCTION

This case study considers the collective impact of the extensive research on equity and VET that has been undertaken over the past decade. In doing so, it draws on our individual and joint work on (and in) a range of equity-related vocational education and training (VET) projects during this period.

In particular, the study aims to convey ideas garnered from reflection on our experiences in two recent projects, which we shall frame as 'case studies' for the present purpose. The first, conducted in 1996, concerned access and equity within VET for people in rural and remote Australia (Butler and Lawrence 1996a, 1996b) and was commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). Research consultants were Elaine Butler and Kate Lawrence.² The second, conducted under the auspices of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), comprised a critical literature review focussing on the multi-disciplinary arena of 'women and VET' (Butler and Ferrier, 1999, forthcoming). Researchers were Elaine Butler and Fran Ferrier. This project was conducted during 1998.

These two projects were complementary in many respects, so that examining them jointly helps to provide a more comprehensive picture of the potential for equity research to impact on or shape policy than would be possible from a consideration of each project individually. Each considered equity issues in VET, albeit from slightly different perspectives and with a different focus and aim. Each attempted to locate equity within broader economic and social contexts, but gave differing emphases to the diversity of national, regional and local contexts. One gathered and analysed new primary data, then used that to 'test' and supplement existing research or secondary data, the other examined and assessed existing data and published analyses. One was primarily investigative, the other was primarily review and assessment. Both were charged with the task of informing policy and policy makers. Although it can be argued that equity-related research and indeed equity policy is marginal to the 'real game' of VET, both projects were funded by mainstream VET organisations, one being the Authority itself (ANTA), the other the major research agency of the Authority (NCVER).

2. BACKGROUND: UNDERSTANDINGS OF EQUITY

Contemporary understandings and processes relating to 'equity' in Australia have been established through an interplay between notions of equity, equity legislation and the State. Equity is both a contested value and a construct developed through the modern State in response to contestation from equity advocates and interested others.

The system that has been widely accepted in Australia as representing equity is the hard fought for legislative base, established around international, national and State-based approaches to Equal Opportunity (EO) and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO).³ The Australian legislation is based on

¹ Elaine Butler is at the University of South Australia and Fran Ferrier is at the Centre for the Economics of Education and Training in the Faculty of Education at Monash University in Melbourne.

² We acknowledge with gratitude the role of Kate Lawrence in contributing to our ideas for this paper. We also thank her for her generosity, which has enabled us to draw extensively on her work on the first project.

³ Legislative (complaints based) mechanisms introduced in Australia, in the pursuit of equality through penalising discrimination, include the following: the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Commonwealth); the Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (South Australia); the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Commonwealth); the Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986 (Commonwealth); Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986; the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Commonwealth). For insightful overviews of the Commonwealth and State legislative framework, as well as its relation with international conventions through United Nations and International Labour Organisation, please refer to Burton (1991), Poiner and Wills (1991), Ronalds (1987) and Walpole (1996).

a system of categorisation to identify the categories or groups of people, who are 'at risk' of unequal treatment, of direct and indirect discrimination. It is procedural in design, seeking to distribute equity both to those willing to complain and to wider groups through the (negative) power of the Acts. As such, it provides both a mechanism for positive change, especially in public administration, as well as an educative strategy with the potential to engender positive behavioural if not attitudinal change.

In VET the term 'equity' is used unproblematically in policy and planning documents, signifying an untroubled assumption that there is a shared understanding of what 'equity' means. Despite this misguided assumption, there is no similar consensus and confidence about how to 'do' equity. Initially, the two major aims established for VET were:

- to provide an educated, skilled, flexible workforce to enable Australian industry to be competitive in domestic and international markets; and
- to provide the knowledge, skills and quality of life for all Australians, having regard to the particular needs of disadvantaged groups (ANTA, 1994).

This framing aligned equity with disadvantage and provided the foundation for the use of target groups to contain and categorise groups of people on the basis of selected 'identifiable' characteristics connected with their 'disadvantage'. The first VET strategic plan identified seven groups as 'disadvantaged' on the basis of under-representation among VET students (or 'clients'):

- women;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- people with a disability;
- people from rural and isolated areas;
- unemployed people;
- people without adequate English language literacy and numeracy skills; and
- people with non-English speaking backgrounds (ANTA, 1994, pp. 15-23).

ANTA's first Strategic Plan identified four major 'themes' as providing the framework for VET: greater responsiveness; enhanced quality; improved accessibility; and increased efficiency (ANTA, 1994). Rather than equity being integral to each of these themes, it was 'attached' to only one - that of improved accessibility. In retrospect, albeit inadvertently, this promoted a conceptual linking of equity and access that devalued both the significance and complexity of 'equity' to defining and achieving responsiveness, quality and efficiency.

From the start, both the sidelining of 'equity' to only one of the four operational themes and then the identification of equity with access, limited its potential to be viewed and to act as a central organising feature of VET (Butler, 1998). Consigned to the margins of VET, the ability of equity and equity research to impact on decision making to shape the sector and to affect change was minimised. Equity came to be viewed and treated largely as an afterthought - something to be considered only after other, more important, things (such as quality and efficiency) were settled. It has also been continually perceived and thus managed as a cost, rather than either an investment, or an obligation in line with Australia's social compact and ethos for 'a fair go'.

Despite the obvious shortcomings of the approach to equity established in the early stages of late 1980s training reform known in Australia as the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA), its position has declined markedly since then, despite rhetorical support. The number of equity categories and their ordering or prioritising continues to fluctuate in line with political issues and 'hot spots' of the day. Indeed, with the proliferation of equity or target groups, it appears that approximately 65-70 per cent of the population could fit into one or more category of disadvantage, begging the question of just who the VET system is serving. At this late stage, there is still no coherent national equity policy for VET; rather there are a number of 'strategies' that tend to layer requirements in the name of equity. Conceptual confusion continues, with mention of 'equity' in policy-related documents being increasingly used in different ways, and displayed in less central or obvious locations (Butler, 1999, in press; Butler and Ferrier, 1999, forthcoming).

Given this confusion and lack of demonstrated commitment from both the State and top level VET decision makers, defining both equity research and equity policy is also problematic. For the purposes of this paper we shall conform to the dominant understanding used throughout VET - that equity research is that which relates in any way to those groups or (less often) individuals, defined as 'category', 'target' and/or 'disadvantaged' 'users' of the system, that is 'clients' or 'customers' or, as Australian citizens, actual or potential students.⁴ We argue that *all* VET policy has equity implications, so the breadth of policies in the area are of interest and relevant to equity researchers. Similarly, we contend that *all* VET-related research and indeed policy should both take account of and be accountable for equity implications.

3. THE CASE STUDIES

The project 'access and equity'⁵ in rural and remote communities' was instigated by ANTA to:

research and analyse the issues affecting people who live in distant and rural communities and to produce a Background Paper which can be used to inform national planning for the vocational education and training sector (Consultancy Brief cited in Butler with Lawrence, 1996b, p. 1).

The report 'package' comprises three volumes, one detailing the research undertaken,⁶ the analysis and the findings (Butler and Lawrence 1996a). This is accompanied by two compendiums - one detailing the extensive literature review, with an annotation of selected findings; while the second details the responses collected during the field work and data collection stage. The Background Paper itself incorporates findings already existing in the area, recommendations made by other bodies and the primary data collected through focus groups, interviews and surveys. The analysis builds on such findings and the primary data collected to provide a synthesis of issues relating to VET in rural and remote Australia. The report includes perspectives of planners, training providers (both public and private), industries, key agencies and organisations, advocates and representatives of regional industries and communities, and, most significantly, people living in rural and remote Australia - VET's 'clients'. Overwhelmingly, as well as articulating a plethora of VET 'equity and access' related issues with the insight that comes from lived experience and local knowledge, the devolution of VET decision-making capacity and accompanying resource support from States to regional communities was strongly advocated.

The second case study, a critical literature review of women and VET, had two major aims:

- to provide material useful to policy makers and practitioners in planning responses appropriate to the nature and scope of women's disadvantage in VET; and
- to provide guidance to researchers and research-funding bodies on gaps in the existing research and the direction of possible future research (Butler and Ferrier, 1999, forthcoming).

Like the 1996 case study, this project is interesting in its review and analysis of so much research conducted over the period selected (1987-1998). The authors argue that the bibliography itself should provide a useful resource, given the pulling together, often with difficulty, of so much disparate work, often unpublished, and with hidden authors. The final report for this project has completed the review process, and has now been submitted for publication. Two of the three key proposals for action include the establishment of a funded and accessible mainstream collection point, archive or clearing

⁴ While 'equity' research usually focusses on individuals and groups, we support arguments that some stakeholders within VET are also marginalised, such as small business (e.g. Kempnich, Butler and Billett, 1999, forthcoming) and communities (e.g. Butler and Lawrence, 1996a).

⁵ Given the conceptual identification of equity with access noted earlier, use of the phrase 'access and equity' makes little sense. The effect of repeating two words which are usually considered to convey similar ideas, despite their fundamental differences, is to conflate the meanings, and shift emphasis to the easier factor 'to do' (measure and account for) - access - to the detriment of 'equity' - a broader and much more encompassing term, of which access is but one part (Butler, 1997).

⁶ Along with identification, collation and analysis of existing research, the project collected a wealth of primary data through extensive field work in rural and remote Australia, the latter being conducted primarily by Kate Lawrence.

house for research in the broad area of women and VET; the other being a call for the establishment of untied research funding, such as that available to the higher education sector through the Australian Research Council, for VET research in general, and including equity research.

The depth and breadth of the literature about, and relevant to, women and VET meant that this project was a significant undertaking. For the authors, acknowledging and drawing on the great amount of interesting and useful work of other researchers and equity practitioners was an important consideration, as was ensuring that discussion of women and VET was connected to, and located in, the economic, historical and social contexts of VET. A narrower, more simplistic approach to both the literature and the task would have produced a much smaller report, arguably easier for bureaucrats and policy makers to digest and use. But such a report would have failed to convey the complexities of women's lives and experiences, and the breadth of the work represented in the literature. The report thus considers economic and social change, including changes in conceptions of work and its organisation; equity concepts and their application in policy and process; and the history and culture of VET in Australia. The report of this project also includes an initial attempt by the authors to map shifts in thinking about equity and equity policy, against broader global and domestic policy and prevailing ideological fashions.

4. LOCATING THE RESEARCH

4.1 The organisations

Both of the research projects described above were located in and conducted from university settings: a teaching and research department with a focus on social inquiry and labour studies, and a VET research centre. The contractual/financial/ administrative details were managed through university consultancy agencies; the academic pursuits of the research in the teaching/research settings (apart from the extensive fieldwork involved in the rural and remote project). Both organisations have extensive previous experience in research consultancy of this type and in finding effective and strategic ways of disseminating the results of the research in order to maximise its impact. These characteristics were also attributable to the key researchers of each project, whose individual and collective expertise in the fields of VET and equity, together with extensive personal-professional networks, are substantial 'assets' in projects such as these.

Particularly in the second case, where the low level of funding did not reflect the time required by and invested in the work, the commitment of the organisations to the project was demonstrated by cross-subsidisation of the resources required for the project from other sources. Both projects, but especially the second case study (where the relationship was formalised at contractual level), were also supported by an independent national network of women with a focus on issues of gender equity and VET.⁷ This strategic alliance is highly beneficial for the dissemination of findings nationally (and internationally), as well as increasing the likely impact of the research at both national and local levels.

4.2 Decision making

In the absence of national equity policy, decisions about equity in VET are made at all levels in VET, involving local communities, enterprises and industry bodies, employers and employer or industry bodies, commercial and public training organisations and providers, TAFE institutions, State and federal bureaucracies. In addition, trade unions have contributed by linking equity issues and training to enterprise bargaining strategies, but opportunities for them to do so are diminishing in a new industrial relations environment.

The implementation of equity strategies is highly dependent on the commitment to social justice of individuals and groups in each location of VET activity. The extent of the impact of equity research on policy and implementation strategies depends on the commitment at *all* levels and stages of decision

⁷ This non-government organisation is the Network of Women in Further Education (NOW in FE). As a voluntary and unfunded organisation, despite its national status, it is not in a position to contribute financially to research projects. However, it did provide access to nation wide experts, community members with an interest as clients of VET and information of value to the projects.

making. Overt demonstration and modelling from those at the 'top' of VET structures is a critical factor for success, but in addition, a high level of commitment to equity (or not), at the local level (planning and pedagogical sites of delivery of VET programs 'on the ground') is also highly significant for local outcomes.

This diversification of decision-making sites has the potential for both positive and negative effects. Equity may be actively pursued, tick-a-box approaches may be apparent, equity may be ignored altogether under the rubric of gender/equity 'neutrality'. For the most part, equity is only one of any number of considerations for prioritising and action. When other issues (e.g. industry needs) are given priority status, and when there are multiple layers of reporting (e.g. local to State, State to national), equity focus and effort is diluted, even where goodwill and commitment is greatest. Only when it is embraced as a central organising feature of VET will equity be able to infuse VET policy and practices.

5. DISCIPLINING EQUITY RESEARCH

5.1 Who commissions equity-related research in VET and for what reasons?

Generally speaking, equity-related research in VET is poorly funded, both at a broad level in comparison with funds for other forms of research and at the project level, where grants are often inadequate for the specified task. These funding patterns both reflect and are indicative of the levels of commitment to, and prioritising of, equity by funding bodies. They also flow from a tendency to oversimplify problem statements and thus research questions.

Where researchers are in a position to support or subsidise their equity research, inadequate funding is less of a problem than where budgets form the absolute boundaries of the work that can be done. As indicated above, the ability of the researchers to subsidise the second case study on women and VET enabled a more comprehensive approach to the project than would have been possible if the limitations of the funding had been strictly observed.

A paucity of 'untied' funding to support basic or curiosity-driven equity research means that most is framed by the organisation that commissions it, and reflects the perspectives and priorities of this organisation. Few opportunities are available for equity researchers to define the problem, scope or even the methodology of their work. Rather they must adhere to the frameworks and work within the boundaries set by others.

Since the establishment of the National Training Reform Agenda funds for equity-related research in and about VET have been distributed mainly by and/or through ANTA as the national 'authority' for VET, the NCVER, State and Territory training authorities, and, to a lesser degree given their demise over the last decade, equity units and agencies within government and VET organisations. In addition, small equity research projects have been funded by unions, Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs), and industry or employer bodies, from time to time. Each of these organisations has a unique perspective on VET and an ideological and philosophical stance towards equity and social justice that come into play when they identify equity problems and frame equity research projects. For researchers with a different view, these boundaries can be both frustrating and disappointing.

Both of the case studies provide interesting examples of approaches to equity research in VET and of the necessity for sophisticated, rather than simplistic, policy responses. Each project was sponsored by a different major national VET bureaucracy, and the consultancy briefs for both specifically indicated, or implied, that the reports produced would be a valuable source of information and advice for policy makers and useful in their decision making.

Both cases demonstrate a hidden complexity in equity research - the existence of multiple or compound disadvantage. Both projects aimed to document issues relating to a nominally single 'equity group', that is to explore the 'disadvantage' connected in the first case with the geographical location 'rural and remote' (terminology that already acts to blend obvious differences between these two categories), and in the second case, the gendered category 'women'. However, each of these deceptively simple categories encompasses many other categories of disadvantage. For instance, people who live in rural and remote Australia include women, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander

peoples, people with disabilities, and so on. Similarly, women are far from being a homogenous group, with many overlapping subject positions available within and across equity categories. It is an understanding of this complexity that requires sophisticated levels of knowledge, and so analysis, within equity research activities. Similarly, it confounds 'quick fix' solutions.

Compared with other VET equity projects, the critical review of the literature on women and VET entailed comparatively high levels of flexibility and independence for the researchers, but its findings reinforced the restrained nature of so much of the equity VET research, demonstrating how far removed from central policy most of it was/is, and how reactive in nature. Much of the research had been designed to reinforce a policy position, or to work out ways to insert equity into a new or existing policy framework, for implementation purposes.

Emerging from the literature reviews for both projects was the striking revelation of the scope and depth of the research conducted in each of the areas - 'rural and remote' and 'women'; the repetitiveness of findings in the numerous reports and their recommendations; and the silence around implementation of findings or development of appropriate policy responses. But the story moves ahead of itself. In brief, it is possible to argue that both case studies, like so many other studies before them, are illustrative of bureaucratic responses to the legislative and social imperatives of being seen to be concerned about, and active in, addressing equity 'problems'. In addition, both reflect the quest by politicians and VET authorities to identify simple solutions to complex issues that can be readily implemented and so pointed to as markers of commitment and concern.

5.2 What happens with/to equity research reports?

Before considering these highly pertinent but political questions, it is worth taking a brief foray into the world of policy making. Policy is both made and enacted at all levels. However, given the top-down nature of much VET reform and the role of a national authority, most attention is focussed on top-level decision making. Equity advocates tend to focus on central policy decision making with deep interest and awareness, understandable given the relatively short history of influence at senior decision-making levels for groups who were largely excluded from processes of executive decision making and indeed governance in this country until the 1970s. While this does not imply a lack of ongoing and active interest in local and community/organisation policy making, most equity research, like other VET research, tends to be dominated by interest in 'top level' national policy issues.

Policy is a site of activism within our complex democracy (Yeatman, 1998), with policy shaping, policy change and activism in the interstices of policy enactment and implementation being foci for both research and practical politics by advocates of, and for, VET equity. Attention is directed by researchers to the discursive features of textual policy politics, including the underlying philosophical/ideological positionings of those with 'authority' and influential voice in policy games. This is especially relevant when undertaking policy 'work' within quasi-market contexts (Lavalette and Pratt, 1997), such as VET specifically and education in general.

Equity policy work encompasses multi-level policy sites, making it difficult to gauge the impact of equity research on policy or to focus effort strategically for maximum benefit. Mulcahy (1998) argues that in VET the dominant model of policy making follows a rationalistic logic, where boundaries are established between policy making and policy enactment or 'use', congruent with the tendency of rational policy models to privilege both policy planning and policy execution as two distinct activities and 'values, goals and problems (as) an unquestioned given' (p. 465). She claims that 'education and training policy making contains a paradox insofar as it enacts separation of policy and practice worlds while relying on their inseparability for its success' (p. 463). This paradox is at the centre of the tension lived by VET equity researchers and practitioners. It offers opportunistic and useful space to 'play' equity games (to 'do' equity), but this also involves much vigilance and 'busy work' for those whose goal is a broader agenda of change.

Equity 'games' can be played at a number of levels within the VET sector. This is well illustrated by the findings of both the case studies, where the sheer volume of work and the consistency of findings and/or recommendations continue to result in apparently minimalist policy response and disinterest

in the longer term. However, the reports themselves become resources for equity work, as alluded to above. To illustrate another sort of equity game, we shall expand briefly on the fortunes of the reports from the 1996 rural and remote project, from our perspective.⁸

As advised earlier, the aim of this project was to research and analyse issues affecting rural and remote Australians, within the rhetorical rubric of 'access and equity', to provide information (but not recommendations) for national VET planning. Tender was by invitation, with details of overlapping research activities funded from the same source not divulged at any time throughout the project (or after). Given the magnitude of the task, and the plethora of work already done over the last decade and more in this area, it was not surprising that rural and remote Australians expressed both cynicism and optimism about the potential of the research to make any difference, or that the major background report (Butler and Lawrence, 1996a) was both sizeable and dense.

After receiving the first report and compendiums, the commissioning body asked for a summary paper (34 pages) that was subsequently delivered (Butler with Lawrence, 1996b). The commissioning authority also insisted that the name of the report was amended to one prescribed by them.⁹ No further formal communication occurred between the commissioning body and the researchers/authors,¹⁰ but, given the interconnectedness of the VET research community, the authors were later informed by peers of a further commission being 'placed' rather than tendered, for yet another summary document (a 'critical synthesis') of the same material (Kilpatrick et al., 1997). This commission entailed yet another interpretation of the same findings, which in turn was inserted (along with selected primary text) into a very different interpretive framework. To the best of our knowledge, none of the reports attached to the case study have been made available through official publication processes or sources. Demand for the original report and summary paper continues three years after their completion, with findings still being endorsed by the wider community as highly relevant.

It is not possible to estimate with any accuracy what, if any, impact this research has had on policy. Given the wide subscription to the report outside the central bureaucratic structure, it has the potential to influence policy, practice and advocacy at the various policy sites discussed above. Rather than feel pessimistic about the lack of mainstream outcomes, it is recognised that this at least is a significant (if marginal) outcome that, in turn, will reconnect with central policy in unexpected ways.

This 'shelving' of equity reports is a common phenomenon, reported anecdotally and supported by the literature searches for both case studies. It is linked to and promotes a perception that bureaucrats and policy makers are reluctant to tackle complex issues in depth. Moreover, it is fed by the consistency in the findings and recommendations of much equity research over time and from many locations and sources, such as observed in both case studies. A common bureaucratic response to complex 'problems' such as inequity is to seek 'neat' dot-point formulaic options or summaries from researchers that do not exceed one or two pages in length. When this is either not viable or not accomplished, or the research findings fail to 'guess the right answer', the research is often put aside, and/or further research is commissioned.

A key to this dilemma is encapsulated by what Bacchi (1998) frames as a 'what is the problem' approach to policy. Drawing on the work of Edelman she notes that problems do not exist 'out there', waiting to be discovered, but 'in a sense are created by the policy community'. In VET, the 'policy community' is immense, but within it some voices are stronger and more influential than others, including those of the organisations and agencies that fund the majority of equity research. In addition, each of these organisations is 'peopled':

⁸ Despite enquiries over time, it has not been possible to establish where 'disfavour' originated from, nor what constituted 'sticking points' (if any), from the commissioning authority. For this reason, this perspective is partial, and written from the stance of the researchers/authors.

⁹ The original title was 'Beyond metrocentism. Issues of access and equity in vocational education and training for rural and remote Australians'. The term metrocentism, which arose directly from the data collected, and encapsulated the findings, was deemed unacceptable by the commissioning authority.

¹⁰ Given the large number of enquiries from the VET field and the community, verbal permission was given for the authors to distribute copies of both reports on request, and at the cost of their institutions (unless a cost recovery strategy was implemented). This strategy is still in place.

who people are, their background, their race, their gender, within organisations makes a difference to the values associated with these organisations (Bacchi, 1998, p. 78).

Within a single organisation there may be numerous perceptions of equity 'problems' and of appropriate responses. Even when research is 'acceptable' to those in any one section of the organisation, it may thus still be put aside when another group challenges findings or recommendations. In these circumstances the existence of equity 'champions' within the policy community, willing to sponsor and promote ideas and initiatives (or set of ideas) from one level or section of an organisation to another, or from one organisation to another, is essential. This is particularly important when competition for scarce resources is intense. In the past, equity units within government agencies played such a role: formulating the research questions (often through consultation), fighting for the resources to support them, commissioning the work and championing the outcomes. However, few of these dedicated equity units now exist. Equity champions are scarce in marketised vocational education and training.

In the new political environment, negotiations take place around the content of equity related VET research reports, including which documents can be cited or not, which issues must be addressed and which put aside, which stakeholders can be consulted and which neglected. In the drive to make equity research reports politically palatable and so acceptable, equity researchers are being cajoled, sometimes even coerced, into 'disciplining' their research. Even where this is not done overtly, equity researchers are expected to guess what is expected of them: how to 'see' the 'problem', how to frame the research, what findings and recommendations to offer. In this way, what is 'sayable and seeable' becomes a central game. The 'carrot' is that 'something may be done' if the research is framed, done and presented in an acceptable way. The undiscussed 'stick' is the perceived 'waste' of valuable equity research funds; that equity research (and researchers) are perceived as troublesome; that the research will be quietly shelved; that the researcher may not be selected for further equity projects.

6. POLICY RESEARCH: AN OXYMORON? THE EQUITY CASE

It is not true that 'policy' and 'research' are necessarily mutually exclusive. Genuine research can, and has been shown (including by examples in this book), to contribute to the consideration and formulation of policy. For those seeking change the process may be longer and more convoluted than is desirable, but in the long term some outcomes are identifiably linked to the findings of the research.

In the area of equity many small steps forward hold the promise of broader and deeper change. Research sparks new ideas that gain currency and are taken up by some decision makers; recommendations provide the foundation for some new systems, processes and practices. Particularly at the local level, close links between educators and communities underpin a mutual awareness and understanding that force attention to the need for change, quickening the pace. However, overall the impact of research on decision making is limited and narrow. Recommendations consistently challenge, but rarely affect the mainstream. At the same time the introduction of new policies that, whether through mistake rather than design, actively work against equity, means that reform moves at a snail's pace, if at all, and that there are sometimes backward steps.

This 'story' was strongly conveyed by our review of the literature on women and VET. This project turned up a wealth of knowledge and ideas, representing the expertise and efforts of many equity researchers and practitioners over a long period of time, often based on some compelling and well-designed research. Continually, these research reports included policy-related recommendations, either direct or indirect. At the margins of VET some of these ideas had been taken up and advanced, by individual researchers, advocacy or equity advisory groups and practitioners. However, the repetitive nature of many of the recommendations provide ample evidence that they have been neither 'listened to' with real interest, nor taken up, by 'mainstream' policy makers. The systemic change that many of these works recommended was never on the agenda.

Throughout the VET sector there are many small programs and projects designed and established to advance equity, many of which have drawn on the ideas emanating from research. The first of our two case studies, the rural and remote project, included a number of educative strategies as a specific

part of the research because our experience in previous projects had shown similar strategies to be effective in improving knowledge and understanding of VET and related issues at the local level. The strategies made it possible to raise questions among, and provide information and networking for, many 'actors' in the field, whose access to information about VET, let alone nationally funded research, is often less than optimal.

In their own ways, these actors continually contribute to the development of local, regional and national policy. Working even at the margins of VET their strong commitment to equity and active effort to drive change can achieve small victories and provide an example that stimulates others to further effort. However, driven down by endless fights for funding to establish new equity initiatives, or even to re-establish those which have been successful but for which the funding has dried up, these equity champions can become tired and dispirited, so that the impetus for change is checked, or halted until new energy - or a new energetic person - is found.

6.1 Is there a genuine inquiry?

Large 'mainstream' organisations continue to commission and fund equity research. Guidelines are written, tenders are called for and contracts awarded on a frequent basis. Researchers are pressed to meet deadlines and other accountability requirements. However, given the lack of mainstream attention to findings and recommendations, equity researchers often wonder if all this activity represents a genuine inquiry. Do the commissioning bodies really want to know? What is the 'real' purpose of the research?

In an open and democratic political social system, such as ours is supposed to be, injustice and unfairness have few open champions. That 'equity', however conceived and defined, is 'a good thing' has, until recent times, been accepted so unquestioningly by the majority that not only was overt opposition to the tenets of equity almost impossible, but active support for 'equity' was considered an essential attribute of social and political leaders. This has been true also in the VET system where, for different reasons, policy and other decision makers need to be seen to be committed to 'equity' in some form or another. Thus, for instance, all policy documents include some reference to equity, even if no action (and no funding) is attached to the rhetorical indicators.

Behind the public commitment to equity, however, the early (and perhaps widespread) foundational assumption of the 'new' national VET system, that if 'other things' were attended to first, equity would follow - that we can 'do' equity later - at some time in the future when there are no prior claims or calls on effort and resources, may well still be concealed. In the short term, all that is required is some public 'show' to re-assure the 'audience' of a genuine commitment to equity.

This may be a cynical view, but it is not without foundation. A clue to the existence and influence of the conviction that equity can be attended to later is the unchanging and seemingly unbreachable gap between the rhetorical commitments to equity that pepper VET policy and strategy documents and the lack of systematic, sustained, broadscale action toward the achievement of equity. As noted above, over a long period, equity research has again and again yielded the same or closely similar recommendations for action. However, when it comes to putting these recommendations into effect, attention and resources are allocated elsewhere. Priority is given to other matters. Equity is disciplined yet again. A possible conclusion is that policy and other decision makers in VET lack the political will to effect the necessary changes that will see equity become a central organising feature of VET, that such change is outside their 'comfort zone' and therefore they are not prepared to commit to equity nor approve and enact the changes it requires.

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PARTICIPANT PATHWAYS AND OUTCOMES IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING: 1992-95

Peter Dwyer¹

1. THE CONTEXT

The Project under consideration in this report is one conducted by the Youth Research Centre of the University of Melbourne in 1996. The title of the Project was *Participant Pathways and Outcomes in Vocational Education and Training: 1992 - 95*. The overall objective of this project was to examine student aspirations, experience and outcomes in order to identify barriers to participation in and effective delivery of programs in Vocational Education and Training (VET).

1.1 Background

Since the mid-1980s there has been a substantial redefinition of the agenda for youth and education policy, and a target has been set for as many as 95 per cent of 19-year-olds to be participants in post-compulsory education and training by the year 2001. One of the purposes of the *VET Participant Pathways and Outcomes Project* was to concentrate particularly on the views and experiences of young people themselves, in the belief that effectiveness of programs is directly related to the extent to which they are accessed by and prove successful to those for whom they are supposedly designed. This has a direct bearing on the implementation of policy regarding education and training programs measured in terms of the degree of match between stated objectives and actual outcomes.

It is clear from the research evidence that current student aspirations are considerably influenced by the fact that Year 12 outcomes have been over-identified with a single post-school option - that of the university. VET remains as the other option, but unfortunately in the minds of likely participants an unwelcome one. The Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) study of New South Wales Year 10 - 12 students, for example, has shown that only 15 per cent actually planned to go to TAFE and, of those who did not, 51 per cent had considered it 'but decided against it'. Furthermore, 'the perception that university is better than TAFE increases as a reason for not considering TAFE as students progress through secondary school' (DEET, 1993, p. 44).

Given the negative perceptions of VET pathways at the secondary school level, direct first-hand evidence from participants in the VET options after the completion of their schooling enables us to assess more effectively policy outcomes and devise ways of overcoming student resistance to, or misconceptions about, the vocational pathway advocated in current policy.

1.2 The Youth Research Centre

The Youth Research Centre was established in late 1988 with a major focus on young people's 'Transitions and Pathways' into active adult life. Major research projects are undertaken which have an emphasis on consultation with and participation by young people themselves, and each project is placed under the direct supervision of a senior academic from the Department of Education Policy and Management in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne.

The Youth Research Centre staff share a perspective whereby research participants or 'subjects' are given 'active voice' in the shaping, the conduct or the evaluation of the research. Our aim is to ensure that research methodology and topics do not relegate the subjects of the research into mere *objects* of study or treat them as little more than a 'target group'. We give priority to a research process that provides a participant response on the effectiveness of planning and policy implementation.

Thus, the 1991 project titled *Students in Seventeen Schools*, involving an Australia-wide sample of 2,500 students from Years 9 and 11, was specially funded by the Marist Schools Committee to help shape

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school policy decisions by taking into account the aspirations, perspectives and stated needs of their students (Dwyer, 1993, 1994). Similarly in 1992, *Pathways to Adulthood*, a DEET 'Good Schools Strategy' Project, involved a review of five schools in three States to investigate and develop programs based on student participation and designed to provide links between their school and post-school educational and career pathways (Dwyer, 1995a). In the 1994-95 Project of National Significance, *Alienation in the Middle Years of Schooling*, our Victorian field study was an action research analysis aimed at identifying the learning needs of students and developing effective responses to them in collaboration with groups of teachers in a number of schools (Dwyer, 1996). In all these cases direct application of the participant responses to the research was an intrinsic element of the research design and of the commitment of the other decision-making bodies contributing to the project. These Youth Research Centre projects have been related to the overall theme of the 'pathways' of young people, and can be seen therefore as a lead up to the *VET Participant Pathways and Outcomes Project*.

As with these other studies, the VET Project also relied on a team approach. Associate Professor Peter Dwyer was in charge of the Project (with Academic Associate Geoff Poynter responsible for a consultation phase with VET institutions) and the team also included one data analyst and two part-time research assistants to process data and assist in interviews with the participants.

The consultation phase with VET institutions opened up the Project to the involvement of other organisations in addition to the Youth Research Centre. The main participating organisations were the Box Hill, Holmesglen, Kangan, Northern and Outer Eastern Metropolitan Institutes of TAFE, Affirmative Action in Training Inc., and the Careers Education Association of Victoria.

1.3 The research

The Project was funded by the Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council (ANTARAC) for one year. Total funding was for \$85,697. The motivation for the research was a concern about a disjuncture between the policy targets for VET and levels of student aspiration for, and participation in, that sector of post-compulsory education. While it might be assumed that the VET institutions and providers were committed to the implementation of the policy objectives in their program offerings, the extent to which the value of VET options was recognised and positively evaluated by the student body needed to be measured and assessed.

To achieve this, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used. The Project sample was derived from an initial 1991 batch of about 29,000 Victorian students intending to leave school in the following year, and a sub-set of 11,000 who completed a 1992 follow-up survey on what they had done on leaving school at the end of the previous year. In 1996 a selected sample of 81 from this sub-set was interviewed and 1,908 participated in a large questionnaire. The questionnaire included 63 items covering the students' backgrounds, living situations, work and study involvement, as well as some broader questions on their life experience and expectations about the future. A final section was also provided to elicit personal comments from the participants about the issues raised.

On completion of the data-gathering phase involving the student participants, a second consultative phase was established with VET organisations. These VET providers were given an interim report on the findings from the interviews and questionnaires, and a series of round-table meetings and individual interviews were set up, both to assess the accuracy of the student perceptions and comments about VET provision and to seek advice and recommendations from TAFE staff and careers teachers.

The findings from the interviews, questionnaire and VET consultations have been made available in Research Report 14 of the Youth Research Centre (Dwyer et al., 1997).

1.4 The significance of the research

The VET Project reflected the commitment of the Youth Research Centre to undertake major research projects with an emphasis on consultation with and participation by young people themselves. This is a significant aspect of the Project because, although young people are often the specific 'objects' of major policy decisions, or narrowly defined 'target groups' for study and research, they are often

denied 'active voice' in the shaping of those policies or in the evaluation of the study or research findings. As the Finn Committee (1991) itself admitted, often the time frame affecting the policy process does not 'permit the completion of either the careful, detailed work or the extensive consultation that must be part of any successful development and implementation of major change in the areas of curriculum, assessment and reporting' (p. 56).

While a considerable range of data has been developed in recent years on levels of participation in education and training within Australia, much of this data has been of a general kind, with comparatively few empirical studies that have tested the assumptions of the policy documents against the actual experience of students. The *VET Participant Pathways and Outcomes Project* was therefore designed to fill a serious gap in the existing knowledge about the sense young people themselves make of the pathways they take, whether the stated goals of policy square with their aspirations and outcomes, and whether the delivery of programs allows sufficiently for changes of interest and vocational focus on the part of particular individuals or for transfers between the University and VET sectors. The metaphor of 'pathways' adopted at a policy level needed to be tested against the actual choices of the participants.

The 'impact' of this particular VET Project, therefore, derives from the direct link it has established between policy research and student decision making. As a result of the Project, student participants have been explicitly drawn into the policy cycle as 'agents', extending what is at times a 'closed circle' of decision making which treats them as 'outsiders' to, or mere 'objects' of, that cycle. For the purposes of this consultation what needs to be determined is *whether* that 'link' between policy research and student decision making is a *discernible outcome* of the Project.

2. DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

Assumptions about the policy cycle can also influence policy and planning analysis. Policy research can often create the impression of a 'top down' model of decision making that overlooks the contribution that operatives and clients also make to the policy process. This is a shortcoming that Stephen Ball has drawn attention to regarding school policy developments in the UK (Ball, 1994; Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992; Dwyer, 1995b). Fulcher too has taken issue with the dominant policy-making models and, in her international study of policy changes in the field of disability education, comments on the air of unreality created by much of the policy research: 'gaps between the theoretical standpoints in this literature and my practical experience of processes' - between 'the theory about all this and its empirical reality' (Fulcher, 1989, p. 3).

In this particular case study, we are concerned with evidence on the 'impact' of research that is often overlooked in policy analysis, because it is assumed to lie 'outside' the decision-making matrices. We believe the case study reveals a further dimension of the policy cycle that is of crucial importance to effective outcomes of policy - *the actual choices that the student participants have made and the impact that their participation in the research may have on the implementation process.*

2.1 Assessment of research impact

As an investigative and data-gathering study this Project clearly fits within the definitions of 'research' proposed in Attachment 1. The research had a double purpose: to narrow the gaps in our knowledge of students' experience and assessment of VET courses; and to identify areas for future improvement. As a case study, the 'impact' of this research is to be determined primarily at the level of the student participants. How does this comply with the terms of reference for the overall project?

Those terms of reference propose a broad definition of 'impact' with regard to decision making. They include the actual 'use' of research findings, and extend this to 'indirect and additive effects', as well as to the 'more general influence' of 'ideas in good currency'. Of particular relevance for this case study is the consideration that the impact of research outputs in decision making 'includes the individuals who participate in the process'.

We are particularly concerned with the three impact areas identified in the brief: 'policy and planning', 'practice and performance', and 'community relations'. Has their actual participation in the

research project had its own direct impact in each of these areas for the 'subjects' of the research (the VET students)? To what extent does the research itself contribute to the decision-making process at a direct or 'horizontal' level, and to what extent do the participants gauge its value and 'impact' in terms of what they themselves have derived or achieved from their own active involvement in the project?

3. RELEVANT RESEARCH

A significant feature of the *VET Participant Pathways and Outcomes Project* was that it filled a gap in our knowledge of student assessments of the value and impact of the VET courses they had undertaken. The available research on student attitudes towards VET was largely concerned with the prior expectations of students at the secondary school level, and there was clear evidence in such studies of considerable negativity and a strong preference for university rather than TAFE enrolment. The main studies of this kind that served to provide background data for our project were those by Mageean (1991), Chapman and Smallwood (1992), Sweet (1992), and DEET (1993, 1994).

3.1 Overview

The contrast between these prior findings and the responses of the VET participants themselves was a major factor contributing to the impact of the *VET Participant Pathways and Outcomes Project*.

First, there is impact related to 'policy and planning' with particular reference to 'establishing the parameters' of implementation. In measuring 'impact' in this sense, what we are asking is whether participating in research about VET has had a direct influence on the subjects' understanding of, and response to, the policy frameworks: are there indications within the data that through the research program itself the participants have confirmed, re-assessed, negated, or challenged the 'ideas in good currency' defining the parameters of policy?

A significant outcome of the research is that the data call into question prevailing ideas concerning educational 'pathways' and linear models of transition from school to work via post-compulsory education and training. Providing the student participants with 'active voice' about their own transitions into adult life reveals a dissonance between their actual choices and outcomes and the assumptions on which policy settings have relied. The implications of this outcome will be examined in detail in the next section.

Secondly, there is impact related to 'practice and performance' in the 'delivery of services at the local level'. In measuring 'impact' in this sense, what we are asking is whether participating in research about VET has had a direct influence on the provision of - and, we would add, the outcomes from - VET services: are there indications within the data that the research program in itself has contributed to any change (improvement, deterioration, reinforcement, modification) in the practice and performance of the participants, and in their use of the services delivered to them?

At a very general level, it is clear from both the interview sub-set and the larger survey sample that, on reflection, the evidence concerning participants' experiences of, and considered judgements about, their VET pathways is overwhelmingly positive. There is a dramatic contrast between the prior negative attitudes of the participants towards VET in their final year at school and their subsequent high levels of regard. What is important for this report, however, is that for many of the participants the opportunity to reflect back on their pathways from school into VET has either served to make them aware of the value of VET as a post-school option or to reinforce their conviction that it had proved to be a much better option than they had envisaged while still at school. Putting this in more individualised terms, it is evident from the interviews held with particular students and also from the open-ended question at the end of the large questionnaire that, for many of the participants, being involved in the research program had had an immediate impact on their understanding and appreciation of taking the VET option.

Thirdly, there is impact in terms of 'community relations'. Of particular interest for this case study is the way in which participation in this research may have had an impact 'locally and between individuals' on decision making and actions concerning VET. Are there indications within the data

that some change (improvement, deterioration, reinforcement, modification) may have occurred in the relationships between VET and other bodies or individuals *as a result of the students' participation in the research project*?

One obvious indication of change is the very positive 'image' developed by the participants concerning VET. Participation in the research project has enabled them to express their appreciation of the value of the courses they have undertaken, and has enabled this assessment to be transmitted to the VET practitioners in the second or consultative phase of the project. In this way, contributing to the research has both contributed to a reinforcement of their regard for VET and their readiness to recommend it to others, and also contributed positive reinforcement, through the dissemination of the interim findings, to a cross-section of institutions and VET providers, ranging from predominantly TAFE institute staff members with middle level management responsibilities, to careers teachers in secondary schools and others with professional and research interests related to VET.

In general terms, therefore, there is evidence within the data regarding impact in each of these three areas of concern to the overall research project. It is difficult in assessing the data, however, to separate the three areas from each other because much of the evidence is overlapping. In examining the details, therefore, we shall approach the data on a number of different levels.

3.2 Details

What then is the detailed evidence in this case study on the decision-making impact of and for the actual participants? An examination of the sources reveals 'impact' on three levels:

- impact from their participation in terms of 'use' of the research findings for other individuals, groups, or institutions;
- direct impact from their research participation on their own 'practice and performance';
- impact from their participation in terms of providing 'active voice' on the implementation of policy.

Use of findings

As we have indicated, a significant finding from the research was a dramatic change of attitude towards VET, from one of opposition or disinterest during the final years at school, to one of high regard and approval as a result of direct experience in VET courses. Various questions in the large survey revealed this change of attitude and carried with them indications that there could be some flow-on effect regarding 'community relations'. This change of attitude also led to significant contrasts between VET respondents (including those who had undertaken studies in *both* the university and VET sectors) and those who only had experience of university courses. The main areas of contrast are shown in Table 1.

The two highlighted responses are those which most clearly indicate the likelihood of some direct impact in terms of 'community relations'. These items in the survey questions have confirmed a change of attitude towards VET, and an assessment of it as an option 'worth recommending to others'.

Another clear indication of impact in the use of the findings flows from the consultation phase of the Project during which the interim findings from the participant responses were made available to a range of TAFE and other VET providers, as well as to careers teachers. In our covering letter to the student participants we had stated that 'your responses and advice are part of a review of work and training programs for young people for the purpose of making changes so that the real needs of young people can be met'. This provided them with the opportunity to communicate their own assessment of VET to those responsible for its 'practice and performance'.

Table 1: Differences between VET and university respondents (%)

		Agreement	Disagreement
I think universities are over-rated	uni only	30	
	uni/VET	49	
	VET only	61	
TAFE should be more highly regarded	uni only	59	
	uni/VET	75	
	VET only	80	
TAFE is for those who miss out	uni only		55
	uni/VET		61
	VET only		68
worth recommending to others	uni only	58	
	uni/VET	85	
	VET only	86	
generally well-organised	uni only	24	
	uni/VET	67	
	VET only	75	
generally well-taught	uni only	23	
	uni/VET	69	
	VET only	81	
generally better than I'd expected	uni only	10	
	uni/VET	53	
	VET only	62	

A Summary of Interim Findings from the Project introduced the second, consultative phase, involving a series of meetings and interviews during the period October to December 1996. The findings from this phase can be seen from Chart 1. They indicate 'impact' in terms of reinforcement of the VET providers' own assessment of effective implementation of policy.

Chart 1: Providers - main response themes

1. The providers confirm from their own studies and experience during the early 1990s a clear trend for young people who entered TAFE programs to see their TAFE experience as more satisfying than they had expected before or at commencement.
2. The providers' experience also confirms our finding that, for school leavers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, ignorance of what TAFEs had to offer and prejudicial attitudes towards TAFE appeared to be major factors influencing the level of consideration given to VET programs.
3. The providers are confident from their more recent experience and monitoring that many of the circumstances resulting in bias against TAFE and ignorance of the TAFE experience have changed, so that barriers to consideration of VET have been lowered.
4. The providers are further confident that the tendency for students' actual experience of VET to exceed their prior expectations has been maintained.

Practice and performance

In our view there are two types of response that indicate some direct impact regarding 'practice and performance' resulting from the research itself: comments revealing that the research enabled the participants *to identify the value* of their VET involvement and the ways in which it had proved successful; and evidence that participation in the research had served *to reinforce their understanding* of the link between their VET involvement and their personal or life goals. These two types of response

are taken as significant indicators because they go beyond the mere provision of information about the decisions of the participants to a deepening of their understanding of (and perhaps commitment to) those decisions.

It seems clear that the research provided the students with the opportunity to evaluate what they had done. They volunteered to be interviewed, were keen to talk about their experience, offered to continue to be involved in any feedback or follow-up, and provided detailed reflection and analysis in the course of the interviews. The interview situation led many to begin making comparisons between their negative view of TAFE while still at school and their current very positive assessment of it.

As one person said, *'Always thought that uni was IT, everyone had to get into uni if they could'*. In this pro-university atmosphere, VET was looked down upon - as another saw it, *'TAFE was second best to uni; especially at the end of year 12. I would have repeated at the end of year 12 if I hadn't gotten into uni'*. After the event, the majority of those who had done TAFE said they had re-appraised the situation: *'TAFE has got me where I am so I am not complaining'*; *'Best two years of my life'*; while many of those who had done both VET and University studies preferred VET: *'In uni you just line up and you are doled out your education. You'd be told $x=y=z$, but you wouldn't know what it meant'*; *'At uni you're still not taught industry skills, they only prepare you for what they are going to teach you in third and fourth year'*; university is *'Too theoretical on its own, you need TAFE to provide the practical side'*.

This turn around in attitudes was put bluntly by one participant: At first, *'I wouldn't have been proud to tell people I was going to TAFE; I'm embarrassed to tell people, I'll say I'm at RMIT, rather than RMIT TAFE'*. And then on reflection: *'I now tell people I go to TAFE and I don't flinch.'*

The importance of these comments is that they emerged within the process of the interview as each participant thought more carefully about what they had done since leaving school and whether it was worthwhile. By themselves, however, the comments cannot be taken as conclusive evidence that this reappraisal was the direct result of the research process as such. Further evidence of this kind does, however, emerge from questionnaire responses which specifically identified participation in the research as a key factor.

The survey questionnaire answered by over 1,900 participants was a comparatively long and detailed one consisting of 63 fixed response questions. At the end of the survey form a further half-page section was provided for the participants to comment in their own words on any of the issues raised in previous sections. About 40 per cent did so, with many adding additional pages in what constituted mini-essays on their experiences and even their philosophy of life. They commented explicitly on the fact that the survey itself had prompted them to reflect in this way, making observations like *'It has been very interesting to reflect back on the last few years and my feelings about what has happened'*; *'This survey has really made me think about myself and goals and ambitions.'* One respondent described the process of completing the survey as remembering and recognising the 'building blocks' that go towards making you what you are today: *'Such questionnaires as this help show how much one has had to learn, strive for, develop and grow to the stage they are in now.'*

In terms of the effects of this self-reflection there were several examples given by the respondents themselves, which indicate possible personal and relationship changes to these peoples' lives as a result of the survey: *'It is ironic this survey should arrive at this time, as I have only just realised the huge sacrifices I have made regarding my personal life and am now attempting to put much more focus on the development of this side of my life'*; *'My parents treat me like a child and I can't stand it any more, the questionnaire just pointed it out for me.'* Doing the survey itself may also indicate some therapeutic value for the participants, an opportunity for them to communicate with another person without fear of being known or identified: *'Thank you for listening, it's nice to tell someone your true feelings for once'*; *'Thank you - I feel much better since doing this.'* If anything, so many of the participants enjoyed the process of completing their questionnaires and the opportunity to speak their minds that they went beyond the requirements for their comments on post-school training and life so as to talk about everything in their lives. A large portion of survey returns contained extensions or comments - written on extra sheets of paper - so people could fully express their ideas and emotions: *'I would explain my*

reasoning in depth but you've not left me enough room to write - I could've wrote a 3000 word essay on this topic'; 'Many more experiences and not enough room to write!'

Inherent in this participation was an underlying knowledge (or hope) that the respondents' returns would serve some useful purpose - people wanted to put across what they saw was wrong with the world, in the hope that we, the researchers, would acknowledge these problems. All sorts of difficulties - from the personal (Austudy, finance, course difficulties, parents/boyfriend/girlfriend) to the social (Bloody Jeff/patriarchal institutions and government/ the great goddess) - and possible solutions were passed on in commentary. (*'In essence we punish people for being stupid or ugly, through no fault of their own, good luck in stopping this!'; 'Definitely more work experience is a requirement for the future generations. Hope you find my input helpful'; 'I think these surveys are great, it's good to know someone is considering ways to try and improve the future. I'm happy to answer these surveys.'*) Some respondents were more explicit in their participation, wanting to know the results of their survey, and what it was going towards: *'Some more information about what the survey is in aid of would be appreciated - by agreeing to fill in this one I've indicated some interest.'* Many respondents also wanted the research to take into account aspects of their diverse lives - *'I was shocked that religion was not included as an option in positive aspects of a person's life'; 'Another question could be whether or not your parents are divorced or not.'* Other suggestions were for future surveys to recognise those who had lost their parents early in life, some who never grew up in a town or a city, homosexuals, single parents. This indicated that respondents were not only participating in the hope of changing the world - they were also involving themselves in the research itself.

Active voice

One of the concerns of this overall research project is couched in terms of 'ideas in good currency' (see Attachment 1). One of the prevailing ideas associated with the development of the VET sector over the past decade has been that of 'pathways'. The title of our Project (*VET Participant Pathways and Outcomes*) reflected this. It was designed within the framework of the conventional linear model of 'youth transitions', which assumed a sequential process constituted by school at one end, and work at the other as the major 'outcome', with some form of post-compulsory education and training as the intervening 'pathway'. The data uncovered in the project calls into question that linear model. The project demonstrated that the participants are a significant and under-utilised source of valid information and re-assessment concerning 'ideas in good currency' at a policy level.

What is important here is not the individualised concerns noted in relation to 'practice and performance', but the accumulated evidence from responses of the participants as a whole. The 'impact' of the research at this level is the combined effect of the responses regarding the accepted parameters of the VET policy settings. By undertaking the research the respondents have revealed a pattern of pragmatic choices that challenges not only the underlying assumptions about sequential 'pathways', but also our own research design, which had been formed on those assumptions. An *inverse insight* about policy, planning and research parameters was an unexpected outcome of participant evidence.

Thus, although all young people in the study were engaging in post-secondary education and training with the broad goal of achieving educational credentials, their own understandings of what this meant to their lives were varied, reflected in complex *patterns* rather than 'pathways'. Most had combined both work and study, either continually (32 per cent) or mostly (23 per cent) since leaving school, and the reported combinations of work and study and the varying attitudes towards those combinations indicated the degree of overlapping there is between the two worlds of school and work, the different meanings the combinations assume in the minds of different students, and the different ways in which the combinations are negotiated and balanced. It is significant that most of the respondents took some kind of combination for granted, and that even in terms of preferences 'work without study' (16 per cent) or 'study without work' (29 per cent) were only favoured by a minority.

Table 2 presents the survey results organised into various category sub-groupings or 'patterns' related to combinations of work and study. If the linear models of the conventional literature and the policy documents are presumed to represent the mainstream we would expect that the majority of the respondents would be included under either the Vocational or the Occupational Focus. Our analysis

of the survey evidence does not support this. As we can see from Table 2, in fact a *minority* of young people could be said to have experienced a linear progression through post-compulsory education, with either a strong vocational focus (at most 27 per cent) or a strong occupational focus (at most 13 per cent). By contrast, the patterns of the 60 per cent majority in the study would not be characterised in terms of linearity or single focus.

Table 2: Patterns of youth transition

		Per cent
(V)ocational Focus	they focus on gaining qualifications to enable a career choice to be made	27
(O)ccupational Focus	they give priority to work,with other life-choices subordinate to that	13
(C)ontextual Focus	they emphasise the 'life' context chosen (family, community, lifestyle)	10
(A)ltered Patterns	they reconsider their original route and change to another destination	7
(M)ixed Patterns	they place equal value or emphasis on a <i>range</i> of activities or goals	43
Total		100

Evidence of this kind raises complex issues about the relationship between the process of policy formation and the impact of research. It is obvious from the accumulated evidence of the set questions in the survey, and from the more 'personal' responses to the open-ended question, that most of the participants are actively interpreting and responding to the policy settings and research designs in ways which suggest that neither the settings nor the designs adequately reflect the complexity of the participants' decision making. In effect, through the medium of their own 'practice' they are challenging 'ideas in good currency'. *The evidence concerning 'impact', therefore, of both policy and research at this level is countervailing - but how else would we know?*

4. IMPEDIMENTS TO USING RESEARCH

One obvious limitation to the impact of this Project on the participants themselves arises from the actual design and purpose of the Project. It was intended as an information-gathering exercise with a view to identifying barriers to participation and effective delivery of programs. Any direct impact on the participants resulting from the conduct of the research was in this sense a 'side-effect' or 'by-product' rather than an intended consequence.

This limitation is to some extent associated with an assumption (concerning who the important decision makers are) which affects research of this kind. The Project was not designed for the purpose of identifying disjunctures between the 'top-down' policy settings and the actual participants as 'decision makers', but rather to discover what those decisions revealed about systemic or operational barriers to the effective implementation of policy. In this sense, the Project took the 'top-down' settings for granted, and thus it is difficult to gauge the ultimate impact of the findings, because those findings call into question 'ideas in good currency' at a policy-making level. Will the fact that the participants have demonstrated that the 'pathways' model *misrepresents* their experience and actual choices really give them 'active voice' within the policy cycle?

The definition of 'impact' for this overall research project makes reference to 'indirect and additive effects' (see Attachment 1). There is a hierarchy of measures regarding impact implied by this. Given that our research design accepted the 'pathways' framework, it would be reasonable to conclude that most of the evidence offered by the present case study is at this indirect and additive level of impact. This in itself would constitute a further impediment to using the research findings because participant impact is by definition 'outside the loop' of the policy and planning which determines for (not from) the participants what are - or should be - 'ideas in good currency'. Unless participant impact has in turn a *reflexive impact* on the policy process as well, what for the participants has valid currency in

terms of their own practice might remain only indirect and additive as far as impact on policy and planning is concerned.

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LITERACY LEVELS IN AUSTRALIA: AN EXAMPLE OF ZERO-IMPACT RESEARCH

John Foyster¹

1. THE CONTEXT

1.1 Background

On 31 October 1974 in the Australian House of Representatives Billie Mackie Snedden, then Leader of the Opposition, moved and Edward Gough Whitlam, then Prime Minister, seconded, the establishment of a Select Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties.

The Committee, whose first Chairman was Whitlam's former parliamentary secretary, Race Mathews, met for the first time on 2 December 1974. The *Report* of the Select Committee was published in October 1976, and since halfway through its lifetime there was an interesting change in Federal Government the committee had been reconstituted in March 1976. By this time Mathews was no longer in the Federal Parliament, but the work of the Select Committee was completed along the general lines initiated under his chairmanship.

Alongside many other activities during the course of its two-year life, the Committee 'concluded that incidence figures [with respect to learning difficulties] based on functional definitions were required' (AGPS, 1976). The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was commissioned (through the Australian Advisory Committee on Research and Development in Education) to undertake a survey of literacy and numeracy. Reports from this survey were published progressively from mid-1976.

The three volumes of the report (Keeves and Bourke, 1976; Bourke and Lewis, 1976; and Bourke and Keeves, 1977) presented copious evidence about the levels of performance of Australian children in a selected range of tasks related to reading, writing and number work. In the view of the authors of the first ACER report (Keeves and Bourke, 1976), the work was undertaken 'at a time when there was increasing public concern for quality and standards in Australian education not only in the popular press and television debates but also in scholarly writing'. The authors went on (having identified what they believed the problems to be) to write: 'Simple solutions to the problems exposed do not exist. We believe, however, that if solutions are to be found they must involve the health and welfare of Australian children as well as the learning and teaching practices in all Australian classrooms.'

In a subsequent publication (Keeves, Matthews and Bourke, 1978) it was suggested that although there are significant questions about what constitutes literacy, what rights of access were appropriate, and so on, the limited time for the project did not allow extensive consideration, and so the researchers 'took the position that *all* students in normal schooling needed to have the opportunity to reach a minimum standard of literacy and numeracy if they were not to be seriously disadvantaged both in further schooling and throughout adult life'.

1.2 The organisations

The Australian Council for Educational Research, chosen by the Select Committee to carry out the project, had been established in 1930 and had a high reputation for carrying out research of this kind. Staff involved in the project had extensive experience of international comparative studies, and of sampling issues, and the organisation's high national profile would be certain to ensure rapid and intense dissemination of findings.

It is less simple to identify for whom the research was done, and who the relevant decision makers were. This is dealt with in section 2.

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1.3 The research

Context

As indicated above, the research was undertaken at the instigation of, and funded by, a parliamentary select committee. The research problem was thus defined at the highest level.

Methodology

Keeves and Bourke (1976) set out the details of the care taken with respect to the definitions of population and sampling, and also describe the four stages used to develop the survey instruments: statement of objectives; definition of tasks and sub-tasks; writing and trial of items; and the defining of levels of competence. The sample sizes (614 schools and 6,628 10-year-olds, and 6,247 14-year-olds) were large. The results were reported comprehensively in three volumes.

Significance

This case study deals with a very high-profile piece of research, conducted by what was then arguably the most prestigious education research organisation in Australia. The project was undertaken to satisfy an explicit need, defined by the Select Committee as a need for 'incidence figures based on functional definitions' (AGPS, 1976, p. 15). On the basis of the ACER survey, the Select Committee reported some eleven conclusions and made six recommendations (AGPS, 1976, pp. 22-24).

The role in the survey of the author of this paper is described below.

2. THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATION AND ITS PROCESS

2.1 Overview

This was a study which followed the standard paradigm for scientific research. It was not a developmental activity in which a solution to a well-defined problem was to be found and trialed, but rather research conducted to advance a particular political end; the establishment of 'the facts' in a particular matter, in a way which yielded comparative data. As has been indicated above in the section on background, political support for the study was bipartisan.

2.2 Activities

The conduct of education in Australia, especially in the public sector, is controlled in a balanced way between education bureaucracies and political groups who wish to bring about particular educational ends. Over time the balance point between the two parties shifts in one direction or another, with the time of greatest political control in recent decades perhaps being the rise and reign of the Schools Commission, and particularly some of its programs, such as the Innovations Program, which overtly and deliberately undermined State bureaucracies.

This study was nevertheless carried out at a time when there was genuine concern about the issue of literacy throughout the education sector, and hence the potential for action was significant. Indeed, a further similar study was carried out some five years later.

The key question to be addressed in a case study such as this is not what specific action was taken, but whether any effective action was taken. If so, there should be evidence of it. Thus, in this case study we do not seek to discover whether a specific organisation acted as a result of the research, but rather whether any organisation at all took any action which has had a discernible impact.

3. SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

3.1 Recent national reports

This section considers a number of policy and research documents produced at the federal level which dealt with literacy during the last decade. The references in a literacy and language discussion paper (Dawkins, 1990a, 1990b) do not include any items prior to 1984; for the purposes of this discussion paper the ACER study did not exist. In the follow-up policy paper (Dawkins, 1991) the reference list is essentially similar, and accordingly there is no reference to the ACER study.

National studies of adult literacy (e.g. ACTRAC, 1994, NBEET, 1996) understandably might exhibit less interest in the ACER study (and do not in fact make reference to it), but the more recent report of Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997) on literacy in Australia, which includes references from as far back as 1965, might have been expected to refer to the ACER study; it did not.

3.2 The 1996 explosion of interest

A sudden rush of interest in literacy occurred soon after the change of Federal Government early in 1996. An article by *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) education writer Stephanie Raethel (14 May 1996) included the following points under the title 'Literacy push targets the lost generation':

- 'improving literacy would be a priority for the Government, which was prepared to provide resources for programs and to monitor them';
- Dr Kemp (Federal Minister for Schools) believed that it was unlikely that any significant progress had been made nationally in the past 16 years; and
- Dr Kemp believed that: 'We simply can't have another generation of young people going straight onto the unemployment queues because they have not picked up these basic skills' (SMH, 1996a).

In his comments, Dr Kemp was careful not to assign blame to teachers or schools, but in the SMH story did refer to 'a political agenda running from Canberra that had refused to face the issue'.

This story was followed some time later by an editorial in the SMH (26 June 1996) which is quoted in part below:

Literacy needs

The plan of the Federal Minister for Schools, Dr Kemp, to boost the basic reading and writing skills of primary school students is more of a wish-list than an effective response. Dr Kemp argues that the community expects all children to read and write to an appropriate standard. But this, he claims, is not happening. He gives the figure that up to 20 per cent of children fail to master literacy and numeracy skills by the time they leave primary school. The secondary school system is not geared to teach basic skills and the likelihood is that skills not learnt at the primary level might never be learnt.

Dr Kemp's answer to the problem he has identified is to set up the first national literacy survey in 16 years. The standards established will be monitored through further surveys and the current State-based tests which monitor basic skills. As well, the Federal Government will hold talks with deans of education to discuss increasing literacy skills in teacher-training courses. If necessary, funds will be stripped from other programs to pay for the push to lift literacy.

On paper, the plan looks to be a worthwhile initiative. But it may, in fact, be a dangerous charade because there is less to it than meets the eye. One of the reasons why national literacy surveys have not been established in the past is that the teachers' federations throughout Australia have been fearful that

comparisons will be made between the various systems. There is no evidence that the teachers' federations have changed their suspicions. Even if the literacy surveys do go ahead, there is a danger that the results from the non-government school sector (if it participates) may be somehow forced out of the calculations (SMH, 1996b).

Thus the SMH identifies the political problem faced by those wishing to conduct surveys of the ACER kind—opposition from entrenched groups. But the editorial did not indicate how the conduct of such a survey might lead to improved literacy amongst schoolchildren.

It was in October 1996 that this story became 'front page news' as a result of further information becoming available to Dr Kemp. Stephanie Raethel's report in the SMH ('"Cult of secrecy" warning as literacy levels decline', 22 October 1996) is comprehensive, and some key points are quoted below:

A national study of literacy skills over the past two decades has revealed that schools have failed significantly to improve standards, with boys' literacy levels showing a decline.

The Federal Minister for Schools, Dr Kemp, releasing details of the survey during a speech in Perth last night, warned that standards would not improve until the 'cult of secrecy' was broken and parents were given more information about school performance.

Despite an increase in specific educational funding to the States of more than \$1 billion in the past 14 years, the study found the percentage of Year 9 students who failed to gain basic literacy skills had risen slightly from 28 per cent in 1975 to 30 per cent in 1995.

The study by the Australian Council for Education Research included basic reading comprehension tests on 14-year-olds in Year 9.

'Not only has there been no improvement in overall literacy levels over the past two decades but since 1975 reading comprehension levels for boys have actually declined', Dr Kemp said.

In 1975, 30 per cent of boys did not have basic literacy skills and this had increased to 35 per cent by 1995. At the same time, the standard among girls was virtually unchanged, moving from 26 per cent in 1975 to 27 per cent last year.

Dr Kemp said there was an information black market among parents about school results. Arguments against the release of information were misconceived (SMH, 1996c).

An editorial in the SMH (23 October 1996) the following day returned to the theme:

Teachers' and parents' groups have—predictably—condemned the call by the Federal Minister for Schools, Dr David Kemp, for an end to 'the cult of secrecy' about the standards of literacy skills over the past two decades. The teachers' and parents' groups are wrong. Dr Kemp is right. Openness is invariably preferable to secrecy. Firms that do not meet the standards set by the regulators, for instance, are named and often heavily fined. The theory is that the publication of the failure to meet standards is an important incentive for erring firms to do better for consumers. Teaching and citizen groups, as it happens, are often at the forefront in demanding the exposure of such delinquent companies in matters such as environmental safety. Why are they so reluctant, closer to home, to allow a scrutiny of the outcomes of our schools?

Dr Kemp revealed that, despite specific funding of more than \$1 billion in the last 14 years, the percentage of Year 9 students who failed to gain basic literacy skills has actually risen marginally from 28 per cent in 1975 to 30 per cent in 1995. Why should the educational establishment want to keep this information from the public? And why shouldn't the public have access to more detailed information about specific schools? The argument most often used by the educators is that the public cannot be trusted to understand what the information really means (SMH, 1996d).

The editorial concludes with a strong call to arms:

How can there be an informed public debate, for instance, about the various theories for teaching reading if the public and the experts do not have detailed information about what is happening now and what has happened in the past? Ignorance is not bliss, it is ignorance (SMH, 1996d).

On the same day (23 October 1996) Stephanie Raethel had a strong article on the same subject based upon the views of Peter Cuttance, from which the following extracts are taken:

Dr Peter Cuttance said he was not surprised by a new national survey showing there had been no improvement in literacy standards in the past two decades.

Dr Cuttance, now Professor of Education at the University of Sydney, said the managers of the education system did not want to know how the system was performing. When they did receive data on schools, everyone from the Government down developed 'a head in the sand attitude'.

'The attempt to withhold information about systems is designed to keep people in the dark', he said. 'Otherwise everyone would have a lot of hassles.'

'We have muddled along in the same way for the last 25 years and we are still muddling along and until we sit down and work out what makes education better for kids and pursue this rigorously and strategically we should not expect to see any change.'

Dr Cuttance said providing information about schools was not going to change the performance of the government schools and that strategies had to be put in place for the long term.

'One of the great problems of Australian schools is they never set a course and hold that course long enough to achieve very much', he said (SMH, 1996e).

4. WHY? IMPEDIMENTS TO USING RESEARCH

The quoted 1996 participants in the debate about literacy were convinced that:

- (a) nothing had changed in twenty years;
- (b) there were those in the community who opposed even finding out that nothing had changed; and
- (c) it was important to establish the current literacy status of young Australians.

Many others who have not been public participants in the debate will hold similar views. In particular, the resistance of elements of the education bureaucracy to the conduct of such surveys (commented upon frequently in the press during 1997) is a major concern to those who have been interested in education reform.

If we accept as a starting point the more-or-less consensual view that standards of literacy have not improved significantly in the last twenty years then a number of possible steps forward can be identified:

- 1) Monitoring of student performance should take place regularly so that future changes can be discerned;
- 2) Establishment of (changing) literacy standards, which are to be modified to reflect changes in society and its needs;
- 3) Implementation of systems to improve literacy.

The first of these was widely advocated in 1996. Such a step will not, of itself, improve the literacy of even one student. But there is widespread support in some parts of the community for such an approach.

The second step has also been advocated (e.g. an editorial in the SMH of 18 March 1997) by some groups.

The third step has proved to be the difficult one. The religious fervour with which varying approaches to improving literacy are preached by their advocates obscures our view of real achievements, which almost invariably will depend upon multiple approaches to solving this complex problem rather than embracing any One True Path. As Peter Cuttance points out, it is almost as though education systems want to avoid progress in such an area as this.

What is certainly not likely to work is cutting funds for education. In late 1996 Senator Vanstone announced that:

The government's legislation for the years 1997 to 2000 includes an additional \$45 million to help schools with the basic literacy and numeracy needs of students (Hansard, 1996).

But the present Federal Government seems to waver on this issue, as this final report from the SMH (14 May 1997), on the anniversary of the first-quoted story, reveals:

Language aid body forced to seek own funds
By Brad Norington

Direct government funding for Language Australia, which was set up under the Commonwealth Schools Program to improve the quality of language and literacy education across the country, is to be abolished.

Under a plan to phase out funding by 2000, the financial backing of Language Australia—formerly known as the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia—is to become the responsibility of private business or State government organisations.

Language Australia currently has an information-sharing network in 22 locations around the country which could be in jeopardy because of the cut.

But the Government argues that it should now be able to survive on its own resources.

In place of public funding, the Government intends that Language Australia should accept contract work from education authorities wishing to make use of its research expertise.

Funding cuts of \$4.5 million achieved by 2000 are expected to improve administrative efficiency and encourage the organisation to 'become more attuned to the needs of its clients'.

The abolition of funding will happen gradually by reducing it by one-third in 1997-98 and two-thirds in 1998-99. Funding will cease in 1999-2000.

The decision to phase out financial backing over three years is intended to help Language Australia while it finds alternative sources of income.

The brief of Language Australia has been to improve the quality and relevance of language and literacy education in keeping with Federal and State literacy standards.

The possible end to Language Australia is likely to cause disappointment to education departments across Australia, given the much publicised drive by the Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training, Dr Kemp, to raise literacy standards for school students.

Dr Kemp said yesterday that this year's Budget aimed to build on reforms across employment, education, training and youth affairs.

The emphasis for the Government was to base its policy decisions on boosting the skills base, increasing competitiveness and boosting employment.

Increasingly, organisations that are not at the core of these objectives are being forced to find their own resources in order to survive (SMH, 1997).

As the SMH writer indicates, such fund cutting is scarcely consistent with a commitment to improving literacy. If we were to try to predict the future, our best bet might be that in twenty years there will be no change from the present situation.²

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² At the time the 1975-76 survey of literacy and numeracy was carried out by the Australian Council for Educational Research the author was a member of the Test Research and Development Division of ACER headed by Bernard Rechter. Like other members of the Test Research and Development Division the author declined to take part in that study for a number of reasons centred around the likelihood that it would not lead to improved literacy and numeracy levels. Accordingly, the 1996 'discovery' of unchanged standards was not unanticipated.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Chris Selby Smith

This chapter considers the evidence from the case studies which confirms the broad framework advanced concerning the relationships between research and development (R&D) and decision making in vocational education and training (VET).¹ The chapter then considers what evidence emerged from the case studies which modified the framework. Four conclusions are drawn in the final section of the chapter.

1. CONFIRMATORY EVIDENCE

1.1 The decision-making domain

The case studies the importance of R&D for decision making at each level.

Policy making at national, State and Territory level. Robinson's case study argues that R&D was important in establishing the conceptual case for traineeships developed by the Kirby Inquiry in the mid-1980s; and contributed to the prompt adoption of the traineeship recommendations by the Federal Government. The case study by Hawke and McDonald illustrates research's contribution to the development of an R&D strategy for VET in Australia, primarily at the national level. Selby Smith and Selby Smith illustrate the use of R&D and its significant influence on user choice policy making in 1996 and 1997. User choice was a major policy initiative of the Howard Government; the researchers' words appeared in the ministerial statement. Hawke and McIntyre's case study of research on adult and community education in NSW, which was commissioned by the NSW Board to explore participation and vocational outcomes, shows that it affected both national and State policy makers. The NSW Board, for example, sought to address each of the research's key findings and many of the more detailed matters identified in the report. Thus, on funding and infrastructure issues it developed a substantial program of further action-based research to restructure its financial base and to negotiate revised funding arrangements with government. At the Commonwealth level, the research was used in the context of a Senate inquiry and as the basis for the Australian contribution to an international United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) conference; but whether it had influence on decision makers is more difficult to establish. Tidemann's case study illustrates the multiple impacts that R&D had on the development of the 1998 strategic plan for VET in Victoria, including the maintenance of an in-house 'research intelligence'. In her view a leading edge planning process necessarily involves R&D. She concludes that productive learning occurs when there is a mutuality of interest among the relevant stakeholders and they share an appreciation that their co-operation could enhance the achievement of system objectives.

The case studies confirm the conclusions of the 1998 book that R&D does have impact—use and influence—on decision making in VET, but not in the way many people think. There are many different types of R&D, many potential uses of R&D in VET decision making, R&D can be used in a wide range of decision-making contexts, and there are many pathways between the two domains. Importantly, the case studies confirm that the extent to which R&D is used and has influence can be enhanced by the actions of stakeholders. The emphasis on linkages rather than on more narrowly defined dissemination increases the mutual responsibilities of both researchers *and* decision makers. 'The extent of the use or influence of research cannot be determined by considering the research system alone. Its use and influence depends critically on the circumstances of decision making in a particular context and the linkages between research and decision making in that context' (Selby Smith, Hawke, McDonald and Selby Smith, 1998, p. 22).

¹ The framework was outlined briefly in the Introduction to this book. It is set out at greater length in Selby Smith, 1999. Comments on an earlier draft by Phillip McKenzie, John Power and Kenneth Wiltshire were most helpful. Any remaining errors are the responsibility of the author.

The case studies:

- emphasise that R&D was only one information source, that information from all sources was only part of what contributed to decision making and that it was not necessarily the decisive contribution. Discussants at the Melbourne workshop in February 1999 suggested that, to the extent that critical debate is valued, R&D's potential contribution is assured.
- confirm that researchers should have 'suitably modest expectations', about R&D's contribution to policy making (Selby Smith et al., 1998). Trembath, for example, cautioned that at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) the effects of the research alone could easily be overstated; and that the influence of the overall research project and its specific findings were difficult to separate from the combination of other factors which were operating at the same time. 'The changes would have been implemented anyway for the most part.'

Policy making by VET providers. The case studies illustrate the contribution which R&D has made to decision making by public and private providers. For example:

- Seddon and Clemans explored the pattern of enterprise-based research in seventeen VET providers and R&D's impact on decision making there. They concluded that R&D 'does impact on goals and operational decision making in VET enterprises ...[although] there is substantial variation in the extent of enterprise-based research, its character and its applications', which is 'strongly influenced by the views of research held by enterprise management and the extent to which they perceive a practical link between research activity and enterprise operations'. At the level of practice they note that 'despite its historical invisibility, practitioners have long engaged in relatively informal processes of producing knowledge to inform their practice. Very often useful knowledge occurred as practitioners went about their day-to-day work, reflecting thoughtfully on what they did and using the understandings that they and their colleagues generated to improve their practice as teachers and administrators'. Seddon and Clemans argued that the linkages between R&D and organisational development were shaped by chief executive officer (CEO) perceptions of R&D and its relationship with VET, and also by practical organisational issues within VET enterprises.²
- Creek's case study of R&D's impact on academic developments at the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture in the Riverina, specifically the development of the Aboriginal Rural Training Program, suggests considerable use and influence. He notes that the developments proved to be 'a very exciting voyage of discovery'. Of course, agriculture has a long history of R&D, linkages between researchers and users and an export orientation to sales in highly competitive markets. The existence of the research station at Yanco was also significant in terms of Agriculture Department attitudes and the mindset of staff. Nevertheless, the contribution of R&D appears to have been substantial: the participants certainly believed it was.
- Trembath argues that the research on credit transfer undertaken in 1995 and 1996 at the RMIT, one of Victoria's dual sector technical and further education (TAFE) and higher education institutions, had a useful influence on decisions concerning policy and practice.
- Jones's case study examined the impact on decision making in the Sydney Institute of Technology, the largest VET provider in Australia, of the development of the resource allocation model by TAFE NSW in the early 1990s. He concluded that, though it was not the originally envisaged objective, the Sydney Institute became a much more effective organisation as a result of its increased research orientation. R&D was 'used as the vehicle to respond to the impact of management and policy decisions, especially those from the external environment'. The positive outcomes for decision making there transcended the confines of the single study which initiated the change.

² Seddon and Clemans identified three models: an informal model, less than one-fifth of the enterprises they sampled, where 'research was seen to be more or less irrelevant to enterprise core business'; a strategic planning model, where R&D for planning and/or market research was seen 'as being fundamental to good strategic management within their enterprise' (almost 60% of the enterprises); and a capacity building model, where about a quarter of the seventeen providers saw research as fundamental to their core business, because it enhanced staff development and, therefore, enhanced organisational development. 'Growing the skills and capacities of staff was seen as the key driver in growing the enterprise.'

- Sefton and Waterhouse's case study investigated the impact of R&D upon policy and planning, and also upon practice and performance, within a registered private provider operating within the Victorian system of VET. Use and influence were both shown to be substantial and integral to the operation of the organisation. R&D conferred a competitive edge in contested markets.
- The case study by Rushbrook and Clemans of Victorian adult and community education providers illustrated the capacity of a research project to broaden out as it proceeds. The project assisted capacity-building by ACE providers and enhanced their ability to act more confidently and effectively in the future. Like Dwyer and Golding they adopted a 'speaking back' methodology to give greater voice to particular stakeholders ('filling a silence'). Similarly, their investigations led them to question the notion of linear pathways and to stress the wide diversity encountered. Their R&D reinforced good practice in community provision of ACE-VET pathways. They constructed an effective learning package that encouraged informed provider debate and strengthened decision making.

Community relations. Other case studies were concerned with the relationships between R&D and the wider economic, political and social systems with which VET interacts. In general, the relationships between R&D and decision making here tended to be less distinct, to be longer term and indirect rather than direct:

- The case study by Hawke and McIntyre concerning adult and community education in NSW included consideration of public opinion, the policy process at both national and State levels, and the activities of Senate Committees. Hawke and McIntyre conclude that, through these diverse processes, the research 'has helped to establish 'research' itself as a basis for strategic policy development, as the sector continues to manage a turbulent policy environment'; 'has helped to position ACE amid the difficulties of training reform ...[and] challenge ideas that the 'vocational' should be narrowly rather than broadly understood'; and 'has moved policy in new directions'. For example, 'the finding of the relatively advantaged nature of ACE participants has led policy makers to increase their emphasis on equity strategies, and to target groups under-represented in post-school education'.
- Trembath suggests that, for the R&D undertaken at RMIT, the time scale of use was frequently short term, whereas the time scale of influence was probably medium term; for example, in the broader community, among other researchers and in terms of RMIT's policies and practice. He also notes that there were many more presentations concerning the R&D by the research team outside RMIT than within it.
- Foyster's case study considers the research undertaken on national literacy and numeracy levels in Australia by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) at the request of a Federal Parliamentary Committee in the mid-1970s; its disappointing levels of impact; and the long timeframe over which research impact may need to be considered. Of course, the longer the timeframe considered the more difficult it is likely to be to demonstrate clearly the use and influence of the R&D relative to other factors. Foyster comments that 'the research did not say what should be done' and notes that the later follow-up study came out with similar results. He suggests that the case study is 'an example of conflict between citizens and educational authorities', 'an example of zero impact research'. In the workshop discussion it was suggested that too little attention had been paid, in relation to implementation, to the differing motivations, interest in R&D and power of the various stakeholders.
- The case study by Butler and Ferrier explores the wide range of equity studies which have been undertaken and why they have not had greater impact on decision making. They conclude that in this important area 'overall the impact of research on decision making is limited and narrow ...Over a long period, equity research has again and again yielded the same or closely similar recommendations for action. However, when it comes to putting these recommendations into effect, attention and resources are allocated elsewhere. Priority is given to other matters'. They raise the question of whether, in many cases, the research was done 'to be seen to be doing something' rather than with a realistic expectation of influencing decision making. 'Overall the impact of [this] research on decision making is limited and narrow ...The systemic change that many of these works recommended was never on the agenda'.
- Golding's case study examines the growing appreciation that there is substantial movement of university graduates into TAFE; why this was not recognised earlier; and how the research has

had an impact on decision making. 'It involved a specific and fortuitous finding of university to TAFE movement in one locality and in one course in one State (Victoria), turning out, through close examination of a wide range of movement and recognition data, to be indicative of an important national phenomenon.' It took some time for the implications to be generally recognised and, as Golding wryly noted, 'those institutions with most to gain from the research, such as VET multi-sector institutions, and TAFE institutions with strong university links, were most co-operative'.

- Rushbrook and Clemans note the importance of local networks, including local newspapers, and the wide variation in levels of empowerment between localities. These factors affect the degree to which R&D has audience and is likely to be used.
- Creek, in discussing the Aboriginal Rural Training Program at the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, argues that the College's changing practice and performance has influenced community relations. In his view, this is evidenced by the strong support for the program from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and their organisations, including from interstate and at national level.
- Anderson shows that the wide dissemination of the research on student support services and amenities in TAFE through a variety of media ensured that the R&D reached interested parties at various levels of decision making. It continued to do so over a considerable period of time. Both factors appeared to be important for the overall use and influence of the research.

Other aspects. The case studies illustrate that R&D can be used for different purposes, and at different stages of the policy process. The impact of R&D is affected by the relative power of stakeholders, and the degree to which R&D evidence and attitudes have audience. For example:

- Golding's case study shows how the assumptive worlds of key stakeholders (focussed on TAFE to university movement, and based on hierarchical views of the post-secondary education world) interacted with changes in the state of the world, notably the recession, which led to an increasing number of university graduates entering TAFE courses in the early 1990s (post-graduate diploma enrolments declined in Australian universities). The conjuncture stimulated research interest in the movement of students between the sectors and opened the minds of policy makers rather more to alternative interpretations and policy implications.
- Butler and Ferrier argue that 'the sidelining of 'equity' to only one of the four operational themes and then the identification of equity with access, limited its potential to be viewed and to act as a central organising feature of VET. Consigned to the margins of VET, the ability of equity and equity research to impact on decision making to shape the sector and to affect change was minimised. Equity came to be viewed and treated largely as an afterthought'.

Although R&D *can* influence particular decisions, it often tends to accumulate. Trembath stressed the multi-causal basis of much decision making. R&D contributes to a reservoir of knowledge from which decision makers can draw, and so a climate of opinions against which background certain ideas, approaches or ways of thinking are more likely to be adopted by decision makers than others. Similarly, in Anderson's case study informants suggested that 'the increased attention paid to student services issues at a State level in 1996 was not a discrete outcome of *Are you being served?*, but rather the cumulative effect of a series of reports ...the impact of research occurs through a process of accretion.'

Conversely, Butler and Ferrier illustrate the adverse consequences for R&D's impact on decision making when accumulation is deficient (and when the will to act is lacking). They concluded that, although 'a huge amount of work has been done' on access and equity, its lack of impact 'is quite depressing'. The research has not lived up to its potential; much of it is repetitive; and there is not a sense of building on what R&D has been done previously. The R&D has contributed to the reservoir of knowledge, increasing our understanding of the complexities of access and equity, its multiple meanings and the multiple disadvantages which limit participation in VET. However, the linkages with decision makers tended to be weak, dissemination was often limited (with much research not published at all or having a very restricted distribution) and the research which was reported was often not acted on by decision makers. Similarly, Golding argues that research which does not build on past work runs the risk of proving to be ephemeral in its influence on decision makers.

It is generally recognised that the timing of R&D can affect its impact. Relatedly, so does the willingness of both decision makers and researchers to interact throughout the research process, including considering changes in deliverables and their timing, as required, so that the R&D remains relevant to the changing needs of decision makers. In addition, the case studies emphasise that R&D can confirm decisions which previously were being considered favourably; can contribute to decisions *not* to act as well as decisions to act; and can consolidate the support for future decisions.

Finally, the case studies reveal that the influence of R&D on decision makers can be significant, even when the decision makers are not aware of it. Conversely, where the intellectual infrastructure of a decision-making organisation is weak, its ability to benefit from R&D activity, whether inside or outside the organisation, tends to be impaired.

1.2 The research and development domain

The case studies illustrate the very wide range of environments within which R&D in VET can be undertaken. These environments include universities, other specialist research centres, such as ACER or the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, consultancy firms, public and private providers, and government co-ordinating authorities, such as the Office for Training and Further Education (OTFE) in Victoria. The case studies show that the various settings in which R&D is conducted are not necessarily independent; there can be alliances which serve their mutual interests; and overlapping interests, skills and experience among them. Nevertheless, the different R&D settings tend to concentrate on different types of research. They also tend to attract researchers with different approaches, values and interests, which can affect the R&D which is undertaken and the audiences to which it is communicated. Some evidence suggested that the perceived quality of the research methodology and analysis, and the reputation of the researcher, also had influence in terms of the weight attached to particular research findings by decision makers.

The case studies illustrate the wide range of methodologies, techniques and approaches which are employed in VET research. For example:

- Sefton and Waterhouse argue that the practice of Workplace Learning Initiatives Pty. Ltd. 'is informed by theories such as those on adult education, language, literacy and discourse studies, ethnographies and pedagogies of work related learning, investigations of embedded technical knowledge and so on. Conceptual understandings that contribute to shaping this organisation's curriculum development and teaching practices also include work in other fields such as political economy, work organisation, HR management and industrial relations, particularly as these relate to workplace learning.'
- Creek emphasises the valuable base of statistical information provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for both R&D and decision making. This point is emphasised by a number of other case study authors, such as Tidemann and Robinson.
- The speaking back methodology, employed for example by Rushbrook and Clemans, allowed the researchers to validate the research contributions that emerged from the world as experienced by practitioners; and to test conventional assumptions about movement from ACE to TAFE-based VET programs. The interviews, transcribed in the respondents' own words and 'devoid of the sometimes alienating language of academic analysis', 'provided a useful and realistic starting point for raising issues and offering perspectives on pathways: why they had been forged; the benefits they offered; the type of arrangements that existed to implement them; and the risks and drawbacks they posed.' As the research progressed participants were encouraged to discuss the issues in their own organisational context and culture, which appears to have enabled a more 'authentic' learning experience.
- Golding states that he came to perceive his research role 'as a responsible messenger or interpreter acting on behalf of the students actually in the process of moving ... fired by a perception that there was an untold, emerging and important other side of the one-sided 'story' to tell'.
- Rushbrook and Clemans argued that their research strategy of encouraging capacity building was essential for informed decision making. The approach also garnered immediate support

from providers, because of the authentic nature of the represented voices, which facilitated use and encouraged influence.

Different case studies adopt approaches based on particular academic disciplines; for example, sociology by Seddon and Clemans, history by Rushbrook and Clemans, and economics and public sector management by Selby Smith and Selby Smith. In discussion at the February 1999 workshop Golding noted how his previous wildlife research, concerning where birds come from and go to, had informed his views about student movements between the different sectors of post-secondary education; 'they don't just go in one direction'. Rushbrook and Clemans noted that OTFE tended to favour quantitative research, whereas the adult, community and further education sector tended to favour qualitative approaches. They also noted other cultural differences, such as TAFE's more vocational focus and the ACE sector's greater stress on independent study; and the variations between States. Adopting approaches based on particular academic disciplines tends to influence such matters as the problems identified as important, the key questions which are posed, the techniques adopted to investigate them, the audiences with whom linkages are established and those to whom results are disseminated. The appropriate research approach is, of course, related to the question which is to be investigated. To the extent that policy issues warrant attention from more than one disciplinary perspective, researchers require, not only competence in their discipline, but other skills and personal characteristics to enable them to collaborate effectively.

The case studies illustrate differences between R&D studies initiated in various ways. Most of the R&D examined in the case studies was initiated by users, albeit at various levels of decision making. It might be thought that where users, whether policy makers or practitioners, initiated the research they would be more likely to have a purpose in mind, to be aware of the research's developing findings and to use them in their decision making. There was considerable evidence from the case studies that they did; for example, for national and State or Territory policy making in the case studies by Hawke and McDonald, Hawke and McIntyre, Robinson, Selby Smith and Selby Smith, and Tidemann; and for policy making at provider level in the case studies by Creek, Jones, Rushbrook and Clemans, Seddon and Clemans, Sefton and Waterhouse, and Trembath.

However, there are also case studies where the research was initiated by researchers. Dwyer's case study and those by Golding and Anderson are illustrations. For example, Dwyer had a good database, wanted to do further analysis and was able to obtain VET funding to do so; there was 'a certain pragmatic influence on how the research got off the ground'. Anderson's research developed from a national student workshop, but the aim of examining student perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the provision of student support services and amenities in TAFE was consistent with the researcher's own value position and commitment. Golding's research 'started as an interest in a workplace, then developed into a personal interest, rather separate from employment', and resulted in a doctorate. He characterised it as 'an explanatory, personal interest, which grew'. In each case the research was used and had influence with decision makers, although sometimes in rather unexpected ways. Dwyer's case study, and Anderson's, are examples of 'bottom-up' decision making, where the research had influence on the attitudes of VET participants, the actions of providers and the perceptions of the community. The research in each of these three case studies raised difficult conceptual and practical issues for decision makers. They illustrate that the implications for decision making of R&D based on an investigation of real world situations in their full complexity can be difficult to handle.

The case studies underline the importance of R&D's contribution to providing new and better information. R&D can also apply existing knowledge in new ways, including for new audiences and in new settings. Relatedly, there is resonance with Kingdon's 'garbage can' model of the policy process (Kingdon, 1984). He suggests that the policy process has three separate streams (political, issues, solutions), which must coalesce if action is to occur. Reform proposals which are not able to command sufficient support are put aside. However, when new policy problems arise in the future, decision makers rummage around in the garbage can to see if any ready-made solutions exist there.

The case studies illustrate, too, the human capital outputs of research. The contribution of R&D to improved decision making in the case studies appeared to be dependent, to a significant degree, on an approach, a way of doing things or of assessing alternative sources of information. As Sefton and Waterhouse put it, 'a culture of research is required at the provider level for the findings of research to

be valued, applied in practice and consequently confirmed or modified'. In their view, personal contacts between researchers, practitioners and policy makers enhance the use and likely influence of R&D processes and findings; and even solid empirical research findings and useful ideas need to be tested, tried in practice and held up to critical scrutiny. 'It is through engagement with practice that the value, and the limitations, of these ideas is demonstrated', but not in a theoretical vacuum. They argue that the R&D is integral to the organisation as well as to practitioners; and that it can represent an important source of competitive advantage. In the extreme, where decision makers are not interested in assessing information, including R&D-based information, as part of their decision making, R&D will make no contribution. Conversely, the case studies, such as those by Seddon and Clemans, Selby Smith and Selby Smith, and Tidemann, emphasise that where decision makers in VET are open to evidence, willing to engage with researchers and new ideas, and seek to improve outcomes by systematic inquiry into past actions and reflection about possible future changes, R&D can make a valuable contribution to improving policy, practice and performance.

1.3 The linkages between R&D and decision making

The idea of a one-to-one relationship between R&D and decision making generally has been discredited; and the case studies support this view. Thus the linkages become more prominent, whether direct or indirect, immediate or longer term. The linkage between R&D and decision making may not be 'anywhere near as strong as it might be' (Butterworth in Selby Smith, 1998, p. 8); but the case studies show that there are many of them, nevertheless.

The linkages between R&D and decision making, and between researchers and decision makers, are a significant element in determining whether R&D is used and has influence. For example, at the level of national, State and Territory policy making, this is illustrated by the case studies of Hawke and McDonald, Hawke and McIntyre, Robinson, Selby Smith and Selby Smith, and Tidemann. McGaw's consideration of two national reviews of educational research, one of which had its recommendations implemented, the other not, illustrates the important role of linkages. The case studies confirm that when users commission research it can reduce the uncertainty of the research process, affect the methodology adopted and increase awareness of the developing findings among the relevant audiences. Similarly, the importance of linkages at the level of VET providers is illustrated in the case studies of Creek, Jones, Rushbrook and Clemans, Seddon and Clemans, Sefton and Waterhouse, and Trembath. The linkages are shown to have the potential to benefit both decision makers and researchers. Conversely, the case studies by Butler and Ferrier, Foyster and McGaw emphasise that where linkages are weak the impact of R&D on decision making tends to be less. Of course, change takes time, often a long time, and while R&D can ultimately influence change, much else can also alter over the period. Golding noted that the skills required for effective dissemination are not exactly those required for competent research; and that frequently the argument needs to be sustained on a continuing basis, perhaps in a variety of forums. Anderson's case study of research into student services and amenities supports this view.

The linkages can operate in varied ways. They can be direct, as illustrated by Hawke and McDonald, Hawke and McIntyre, Robinson, and Selby Smith and Selby Smith. R&D can occur in the decision-making context, as illustrated by Tidemann at the State policy-making level, and by Creek, Jones, Seddon and Clemans, Sefton and Waterhouse, and Trembath, at the provider level. For example, Creek stresses the extensive R&D which took place, the negotiations, mutual learning and development of more trusting relationships between the College, individual Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders and their communities, and the changes required from providers as well as clients. 'Trust had to be developed; initially there was a lot of distrust; now they see our college as their college; there also had to be a major shift in staff attitudes and behaviour.' Staff now have 'a yearning to discover, to learn what are appropriate methods of delivery, what are the impediments to training'. Creek also notes that the particular avenues through which R&D influenced decision making had a fortuitous element: 'we were seeking an opportunity to do new things .. In the event, it emerged that there were a range of important needs for education and training which were not being satisfactorily met.' Nevertheless, research skills and attitudes, as well as the history, experience and resources of the College and its staff, played a significant role.

The linkages can operate when the research study is nearing its completion, but, taken overall, the case studies support Huberman's conclusion that sustained interactivity is an important means of achieving instrumental change, that both formal and informal linkages can contribute and that linkages established during a project can have effects which transcend the single study (Huberman, 1990). Sefton and Waterhouse, for example, stress that 'the culture of research that has developed within the organisation predates these projects .. Indeed, it could be argued that these projects represent the culmination of previous research'. They argued that the research oriented culture of the training provider encouraged innovation, supported its application to the teaching practice of staff, and maximised the impact on the organisation of relevant research conducted both inside the organisation and elsewhere. While their R&D had substantial impact on the activities of the practitioners involved, it also reached beyond the immediate practitioners and even beyond the specific industry in which the research was conducted. Rushbrook and Clemans found that their providers 'had in common the crafting of strong community networks that enabled educationally productive links between employers, client groups, other providers and funding sources. Mostly informal and established through personal contacts and movement within community and business groups, the networks were powerful mechanisms for both responding to, and creating demand for, vocational programs'. They suggested that, at least partly because of the network of linkages, 'the package has contributed significantly to an increase in community providers' capacities to make informed decisions in a time of significant structural change'.

Tidemann emphasises that, in an organisational context, the research process itself can be a valuable opportunity to develop useful knowledge, improve research skills and attitudes, and enhance linkages. Anderson argues that 'as a process, the research project provided a vehicle for facilitating debate at the provider level on policy issues relating to student services provisions .. Student participation in, and management of, the research process may have also produced some positive long-run effects', especially in Victoria. Sefton and Waterhouse note that unions and employers sat down with the researchers once a week for ten weeks to read the drafts; and that the shared ownership, commitment and mutual learning which resulted was critical to the use and influence of the R&D by decision makers. This was true at the level of the industry partners and also at the national and State policy-making level. The research process itself can foster linkages between theory and practice, between research and decision making; as when 'providers bring R&D into their day-to-day work' and 'the practical realities of their day-to-day work informs their research'.

There is a role for intermediaries or brokers, given the significant differences in attitudes, cultures and incentives which exist between the R&D and decision-making communities, to facilitate exchange between the producers of R&D and its potential users. The case studies by Trembath and Jones illustrate the role of a research and policy unit within a provider organisation in facilitating information, skill and attitude exchanges between researchers and decision makers. The case studies of Rushbrook and Clemans, and Anderson further illustrate the potentially valuable role of those who can bridge the R&D and decision-making domains. Tidemann's case study illustrates the use of R&D in policy development by a State training authority, emphasising that what is important to be done, how best to do it and how to integrate R&D outcomes into ongoing policy development, including discussion and negotiation with key stakeholders cannot, in the last resort, be outsourced. Sefton and Waterhouse argue that VET providers with a culture of R&D can play an important role as mediators and advocates for industry-based research, liaising, facilitating access, explaining and interpreting R&D to users, while also promoting R&D relevant to industry needs. They argue that such training providers can play an important part in linkages, in both directions, between research and use, between theory and practice. In addition, Seddon and Clemans suggest that the teacher has a potentially important role in brokerage, which has tended to be downplayed in recent years; but they argue that the role is being reinvigorated by the debate over lifelong learning. Some of Sefton and Waterhouse's research has been used in teacher education courses, 'one report even being set as a key text'.

R&D can also influence decision making indirectly. For example, Creek's case study illustrates a situation where continuous research and review, with mutual respect and mutual learning designed to achieve improved outcomes, meant that investigations and inquiry were collaborative, internally between staff, as well as between staff, individual Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders and their communities. Thus, the findings of a training needs analysis were achieved by consensus between the

college and the community in that the curriculum, delivery mode and methodology, training locations and timing were all negotiated and agreed to by all concerned. The training decisions were also flexible, in that they could be, and on occasions were, renegotiated by the programme co-ordinator and community representatives. The result was an active training culture, an attitude of continuous improvement and a strong desire to analyse training programmes so that they could be improved for the benefit of all participants. Dwyer and Golding's case studies threw doubt on prevailing assumptions by confronting them with relevant but contrary evidence; and were motivated by the desire to give a more active voice to hitherto disadvantaged participants in VET. Old habits of thought were challenged and new policies and practice rendered more likely. However, research does not always change community policy or practice, as illustrated by Foyster's case study of research by ACER into national levels of literacy and numeracy in the mid-1970s.

R&D can contribute to the research system rather than directly to decision making, although in the long term this may augment the reservoir of knowledge from which decision makers draw. R&D which has little effect on decision making in the short term may nevertheless contribute to the accumulating body of knowledge, to which ideas are in good currency and to longer term changes in public attitudes, the media and the political process. Examples are provided by Golding's case study, by Dwyer's and to a lesser extent by McGaw's. Anderson noted that the research on student support services and amenities 'appears to have become a key reference and building block for other researchers'. Thus, modest initial impact does not necessarily preclude a larger impact eventually.

2. EVIDENCE WHICH MODIFIED THE FRAMEWORK

Overall the framework for analysing the relationships between R&D and decision making is broadened rather than changed fundamentally by the evidence of the case studies. However, the case studies emphasise the great diversity of circumstances in which the relationships between R&D and policy, practice and performance in VET take place. Of the seventeen case studies no two are identical. In some cases R&D is used but does not have influence, as in one case cited by Trembath. In other cases R&D was both used and had influence on decision making: for example, at the level of national, State and Territory policy making in Hawke and McDonald, Hawke and McIntyre, Robinson, Selby Smith and Selby Smith, and Tidemann; or, at the level of individual VET providers, as illustrated by Creek, Jones, Rushbrook and Clemans, Seddon and Clemans, Sefton and Waterhouse, and Trembath. In other cases the research appeared to have little influence, as illustrated by Foyster's case study, or the outcome is more ambiguous, as in the case studies by Anderson, Dwyer, and Golding. The impact of the research was not always exactly what had been expected initially, as illustrated in the case study of the Sydney Institute of Technology by Jones. In a number of cases there was uncertainty about the precise degree of R&D's use or influence. Case study authors were generally involved with the circumstances they analysed, which may have affected their judgement of the impact of research; more generally, it may be that no single participant can know the full story.

Despite the provision of a common analytical framework, the efforts of authors to address the questions raised and the workshop discussions, the case studies are more striking for their differences than for their similarities. As Trembath's case study illustrates the implementation of R&D recommendations is rarely simple. Consultations are generally involved, often with a wide range of interests. Other factors can come into play. Compromises and adjustments to the original proposals are the norm rather than the exception. Taken as a whole the case studies reveal the dynamic, turbulent and demanding environment in which VET providers, policy makers and practitioners are operating. Perhaps this is not surprising given the contested nature of the VET environment: between Commonwealth and State Governments; between public and private providers; and between the industry partners.

The case studies confirm that much R&D is undertaken at provider and practitioner level, especially if a broad interpretation is given to the definition of R&D; and that it has a significant effect on decision making there:

- Seddon and Clemans provide evidence of extensive R&D at provider level in a range of VET institutions and show that it had impact, in the enterprise and elsewhere. They argue that perceptual, organisational and motivational factors had an effect on how R&D was done and

how it was used in the enterprises. For example, when the organisation viewed VET as 'a hands on, not a heads on sector', it limited the extent of R&D and its potential impact on decision making.

- Trembath and Jones examine the internal impact of R&D, internally initiated at RMIT, but initiated in response to external developments at the Sydney Institute of Technology. The R&D had beneficial effects on decision making at both institutions, but it appeared to have a more pervasive influence throughout the institution in the latter case.
- Sefton and Waterhouse stress the importance of R&D for the effective operation of a private training provider: Creek provides another example. Indeed, from one perspective the case studies reveal training providers as enterprises, to the competitive success of whose activities R&D can make a valuable contribution.
- The case studies throw less light on the relationships between R&D and decision making by individual VET practitioners, although studies such as those by Anderson, Creek, Dwyer, Golding, Rushbrook and Clemans, Seddon and Clemans, and Sefton and Waterhouse suggest it is beneficial and may be quite widespread. This is consistent with the findings by the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training (Selby Smith et al., 1998, chapter 4).

It might be argued that the case studies overemphasise, at least implicitly, the specific contribution of R&D to decision making. However, while the focus here tends to be on R&D's contribution to decision making, this is not intended to imply that research should be viewed solely as a support for decision making, especially if the relationship is conceived as narrowly instrumental and short term. Research contributes to the reservoir of knowledge, which can assist decision making in the future. More generally, research is not solely the servant of decision making: it has other important societal purposes. Education, including research and research training, as the West Report has argued, has special social and cultural dimensions that contribute to the transmission of knowledge, an informed citizenry and the quality of life in Australian society (West, 1997, p. 1).

The case studies, especially those by Anderson, Butler and Ferrier, Creek, Dwyer, Golding, and Sefton and Waterhouse brought students and workers into prominence as an additional set of significant decision makers by whom R&D can be used, on whom it can have an influence, and for whom it can have significance. This was a valuable addition to the framework for analysing the relationships between R&D and decision making which had been advanced previously.

- Dwyer and his associates gave priority to a research process that provided a participant response to the effectiveness of planning and policy implementation. They argued that, although young people are often the specific 'objects' of major policy decisions, or narrowly defined 'target groups' for study and research, they are too often denied 'active voice' in the shaping of those policies or in the evaluation of the study findings. The actual choices that the student participants made were clarified, and in many cases reinforced, by their participation in the research, by their reflection on the questions raised, the discussions stimulated and the conclusions reached for themselves and those they interact with. 'In their own experience and practice they [i.e. the student respondents] were contradicting the ideas underlying policy.'
- Also Dwyer's research uncovered 'dramatic changes in the attitudes of participants in vocational education and training .. a quite dramatic turnaround'. This contrasted starkly with the relatively unchanging views of VET expressed by those who only had experience of university study. The VET students' involvement in the research appeared to contribute to 'how they related to the world, their personal development and adult identity'. There also appeared to be evidence that the research had influence on practice and performance in relation to the delivery of VET services at the local level (and contributed to some change in community attitudes).
- Relatedly, the research reported by Rushbrook and Clemans challenged the notion of linear ACE-VET pathways. More often than not, participants 'worked internal pathways from non-accredited programs or workshops to accredited programs before moving to external provision'. This is relevant for students, of course, but also to wider audiences of researchers, policy makers at national, State and Territory levels, individual training providers (in terms of their policies and their practice) and the broader community.

- Rushbrook and Clemans commented, as did Dwyer and Golding, on the frequency of the requests they received. For example, Dwyer was sought for keynote addresses and discussions in education, including by career advisers and school parent groups (where many 'saw university as the only really worthwhile option'), and for discussions with the industry partners: 'the word got around'. A strong message of student support was going back to providers and the wider community via the researchers.
- Anderson's case study reflected a 'commitment to giving students a voice on issues that directly affect them, and promoting critical reflection on the values, interests and assumptions that shape and inform official policy'. The case study reveals that the impact of the research varied widely among different groups of decision makers in TAFE. At a national level, 'the impact of the research was minimal'. Arguably, the report made its greatest, and potentially most enduring, impact at an unofficial level among student services staff and, at least in Victoria, student organisations. The research was used as a resource for informing changes in policy, planning and practice among these groups. It was also employed as a tool for professional development, critical reflection and, to some extent, policy advocacy.

3. FOUR CONCLUSIONS

- (i) The seventeen case studies, taken together, confirm the validity of the broad framework adopted for analysing the relationships between R&D on the one hand and policy, practice and performance in vocational education and training on the other. Typically aspects of the decision-making arrangements, the relevant R&D system and the linkages between them are significant. Within the decision-making arrangements the case studies illustrate the role which can be played by the policy process, the relative power of the respective stakeholders and the assumptive worlds of key actors. Within the R&D system the three attributes of new and better information, research skills and attitudes and educated people are all shown to be significant. Linkages between R&D and decision making, and between researchers and decision makers, are shown to be important; both formal and informal linkages, and linkages before and during the research project, as well as at its completion. The case studies illustrate that the linkages established through a single research project can have effects which transcend the impact of the single study; that linkages can be important at each level of decision making; and that linkages can be indirect as well as direct, as through community organisations, the media, public opinion and the political process. The emphasis on linkages rather than on more narrowly defined dissemination increases the mutual responsibilities of both researchers and decision makers.
- (ii) The case studies emphasise the complexity of the situations which arise in the real world. The case studies stress the individuality of the specific circumstances through which the broad relationships between R&D and decision making operate; and the importance of considering dynamic aspects of the relevant situation as well as more static aspects. Administrators, policy makers and VET practitioners tend to seek clear conclusions and simple recommendations for action, whereas the case studies emphasise that R&D often reveals the complexity of real life situations. The case studies also emphasise the considerable importance that can attach to individual champions or sponsors, whether in initiating the R&D or making effective use of the results. One set of decision makers who are often overlooked, but who were brought to centre stage by certain of the case studies, were trainees and students. Research can influence their participation, their decision making and that of training providers through their active involvement in the research process and the enhancement of their active voice. However, the precise contribution of R&D to decision making is hedged with many uncertainties and qualifications. No single analyst, observer or participant may be in a position to know the full story, so that estimates of R&D's impact on decision making are almost always subjective and incomplete; the counterfactual is often difficult to specify precisely; and the case studies illustrate the multiple sources of R&D, its multiple destinations in decision making, and the multiple pathways through which impact can occur.
- (iii) In considering the relationships between R&D and decision making in VET the case studies complement other approaches, such as literature review, symposium, quantitative studies and consultations with key stakeholders, by providing a richness of detail and an appreciation of the

complex and varied channels through which the broad relationships operate. For example, surveys enable familiarity with a wide range of material, speedy appreciation of common elements and generalisations about the overall project; but the analysis tends to be shallow compared to case studies, which allow for a much greater depth of understanding. Illumination of the research question was enhanced by the use of purposeful maximum variation sampling, the wide range of different cases included in this book, and their diverse circumstances.

- (iv) The case studies raise the difficult issue of the precise boundaries of R&D, especially in relation to research skills and attitudes, and at the practitioner level. Indeed, it has been argued that in organisations where the culture of R&D is strong, the distinctions between R&D, continuous improvement, action research, professional social inquiry, reflective practice, learning and work become blurred. An openness to evidence in making decisions, for example, can be characterised as a way of working, as well as characteristic of R&D. Paradoxically, those who are already most knowledgeable are often those who are most open to new evidence; while those who are most anxious about potential departures from established positions may be those who are less secure in their current knowledge and more determined to hang on to what they think they do know. A number of the case studies can be seen as wrestling with how best to define the precise boundary of R&D activity.

At the February 1999 workshop it was suggested that the research process is driven by the evidence, the search for improved understanding and an attitude of openness to contest. It was argued that the researcher's role involves engagement at two levels: the theoretical framework or discourse of discussion; and the practical or experiential evidence. Although this engagement at two levels involves tensions, they are an essential element of performing the researcher role. Of course, the R&D system is wider than the individuals who undertake research, since it involves the institutions of knowledge production, the mechanisms which support it and the processes by which established positions are challenged, tested and, where necessary, changed. The greater the stress laid on tacit and uncodified knowledge, the more attention is focussed on research skills and attitudes, and the greater the concentration on action research, professional social inquiry and reflective practice by provider organisations and individual practitioners the wider becomes the definition of R&D and thus its likely impact on VET decision making. Indeed, in an increasingly turbulent environment, an interest by decision makers in evidence, an openness to new perspectives and a willingness to learn progressively and systematically from the experience of oneself and others is central to improving policy, practice and performance in VET. The case studies illustrate the diverse ways in which a beneficial relationship between R&D and decision making can operate, or be frustrated.

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ATTACHMENT 1: BACKGROUND PAPER CIRCULATED TO THE AUTHORS OF CASE STUDIES¹

1. INTRODUCTION

The Australian National Training Authority's Research Advisory Council (ANTARAC) specified in 1996 that the research project 'review the evidence for and where possible evaluate the extent of influence of research in vocational education and training'. The Council indicated that it was particularly interested in the impact of research in three areas of decision making and action:

- practice and performance;
- policy and planning; and
- community relations.

It became apparent at the outset of the research project that certain aspects of the study required careful consideration before the project could get fully under way. Key terms required careful definition; the scope of the study, e.g. in terms of its focus and time frame, needed to be set down. Agreement among participants on these matters would assist in determining the overall perspective of the project and its boundaries, and ensure that concepts were applied consistently across the five main phases of the project: literature review; symposium; quantitative studies; case studies; and overseas experience and perspectives.

In particular, there was a need to define:

- research, in the context of this particular project (see Section 2.1 below);
- the three areas of decision making and action which were the focus of ANTARAC's attention (see Section 2.2);
 - policy and planning;
 - practice and performance; and
 - community relations;
- the 'impact' of research (see Section 2.3); and
- vocational education and training, the area in relation to which the decision making and action takes place (see Section 2.4).

The scope of the study also needed to be determined in terms of:

- the boundaries of VET research (see Section 3.1);
- its geographical limits (Section 3.2);
- the research time frame (Section 3.3); and
- disciplinary approach (Section 3.4).

Finally, agreement needed to be reached on the overall perspective of the project; that is, whether the relationship between research and decision making and action was to be considered primarily from the perspective of research or from the viewpoint of the decision makers and other actors in the vocational education and training (VET) system (or whether both approaches are equally valid).

¹ The original version, circulated in early 1997, has been slightly modified. The project was funded by ANTARAC, which was abolished during 1997.

2. DEFINITIONS

2.1 Research

The definition proposed was the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Frascati Manual) definition for research and development (R&D) used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as the basis for the Australian Standard Research Classification (ABS, 1993).

R&D comprises 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this knowledge to devise new applications'.

The ABS noted that R&D is 'characterised by originality. It has investigation as a primary objective ... R&D ends when work is no longer primarily investigative' (ABS, 1993, p. 3).

The ABS recognised that there may be difficulties in separating the boundaries of R&D from the subsequent implementation phase. Listed among the 'obscure boundaries' having relevance to this particular project were:

- general purpose or routine data collection; and
- policy-related studies.²

The ABS advised that 'collecting data in support of R&D work is included in R&D'. Data collection of a 'general nature', to record phenomena of a 'general public or government interest' was excluded.

- Notwithstanding this advice, the research team considered there was value in listing such data collections for the benefit of researchers and other users. They were to be included in the inventory of VET research which would result from the project.

In relation to policy-related studies, the ABS conceded that to determine the boundaries is 'complex' and that 'rigour' is required. Substantively, the ABS advised that 'studies to determine the effects of a specific national policy to a particular economic or social condition or social group have elements of R&D. Routine management studies or efficiency studies are excluded' (ABS, 1993, p. 4).

- Again, notwithstanding this advice, the project team took the view that the ANTARAC brief would favour the inclusion of routine management studies and efficiency studies, particularly in relation to 'practice and performance'. In fact, the principle of inclusion characterised the approach to 'research' in each phase of the project.

Defining research by reference to its essential attributes

The ABS definition was useful for defining the boundaries between what does and what does not constitute research for the purposes of an inventory. However, in a previous study which sought to establish the role of research in public policy decision making (C. Selby Smith et al., 1992b), it was found that the ABS definition needed to be teased out further to identify those essential attributes of research which are the inputs into decision making. Research can also be defined by reference to these attributes.

A common starting point in the literature has been to view research as providing *information*. 'Information is a key input into the making of policy and social science (research) has become a major supplier of information' (Weiss, 1980). More particularly, research has been seen to provide new and better information. Another critical attribute of research relates to what might broadly be defined as *research skills and attitudes*. Here the contribution of research is not so much a particular set of findings but an approach, a way of doing things or of assessing alternative sources of information. Thirdly, the research system provides *appropriately educated people*. As Mr Dawkins, the former Federal Minister for

² Policy-related studies were defined in the Frascati Manual to include 'analysis and assessment of existing programs, continued analysis and monitoring of external phenomena (e.g. defence and security analysis), legislative inquiry concerned with general government departmental policy or operations' (ABS, 1993, p. 4).

Employment, Education and Training has said, 'Australia's educational institutions make perhaps their most important contribution to our research effort through the provision of skilled personnel'. It was argued therefore, in terms of this project, that research could be defined in terms of its attributes; in particular, information; research skills and attitudes; and appropriately educated people (Dawkins, 1989, p. 36).

Research and the publication of research results

The ABS definition of research (R&D) characterises R&D as 'creative work (our emphasis) undertaken ... to increase the stock of knowledge'. In the course of the study referred to above, it was found that there was misunderstanding here; in particular, a widespread tendency to limit research to publications. The report of that study argued that 'reporting and accessibility of research is to be distinguished from the research itself'. It is considered that this distinction should be maintained for this project, including for assembling the database of VET research: primacy is placed on research studies.

A related point is that our attention is given to the performers of research rather than to funders.

2.2 The scope of the areas of decision making and action proposed by ANTARAC

Policy and planning

Policy involves decisions to determine the broad parameters of a given functional area of government. Generally, policy decisions reflect the elected government's priorities and broad political considerations have a particular influence at this level. Policy decisions are about establishing the overall legislative and organisational framework in a given functional area (in this case, VET), determining the major programs and the level of resources available to support the functional area.

Planning decisions are directed towards determining the major program elements and the allocation of resources among these elements, within the overall legislative, organisational and budgetary framework which reflects policy. Planning decisions focus on establishing the parameters (including financial and human resources) and organisational structures to support the implementation of major programs having regard to effectiveness and efficiency criteria but also, often, political considerations.

The locus of policy and planning decisions primarily is at the level of national and State and Territory governments, within Ministerial offices and departments and agencies; but may also be at the level of individual providers, particularly where systems are more devolved or the degree of devolution is changing.

Practice and performance

Decision making and actions relating to practice and performance are concerned primarily with the delivery of services at the local level: the provision of vocational education and training by individual providers to trainees and industry. Policy and planning made operational contributes to practice and performance. Decisions and actions to achieve the most effective and efficient use of resources, once policy has been adopted, program elements have been determined and resources have been allocated, constitute practice and performance. The loci of these decisions are at the individual provider level and in operational areas of departments and agencies; the more so, the more centralised the system.

Community relations

Decision making and actions relating to policy and planning, and practice and performance generally are focussed at different levels within the VET system. In contrast, community relations are concerned with the interactions between the wider economic, political and societal systems and VET. These interactions will be multi-faceted. Relations may occur at all levels - national, State and Territory,

regional, locally and between individuals. They may be conducted through formally constituted channels or informally. They may be structured or *ad hoc*.

2.3 'Impact' of research

The terms of reference for the consultancy focussed on the 'impact' of research in VET. What constitutes 'impact' or use of research?

The concept of 'impact' of research on decision making and action has a number of aspects. In relation to the impact or 'use' of research findings, Weiss (1980) has commented that 'some limit the definition of use to the adoption of the explicit recommendations of a single study. At the other extreme, some people discuss their use of research in terms of sensitivity to [social science] perspectives'. In a more recent article, Weiss (1986) concludes that it often takes time and patience and multiple messages conveyed through multiple channels before social science has an impact.

In fact, as noted in our successful consultancy bid to ANTARAC, the impact of research can be indirect as well as direct, minor individually but major in combination, additive as well as separate. Indirect and additive effects could amount eventually to a very significant impact, even though the impact could not be identified with any one study.

A distinction can also be drawn between the use of research in making specific decisions and their potentially more general influence – 'ideas in good currency'. The argument here is that impact of research findings, if impact implies leading to concrete identifiable action, is too restrictive. This is for two main reasons. First, it is too simplistic in its view of decision making and of the role which research may have in it. Secondly, interest could centre on decisions *not* to act, as well as on decisions to act. To resolve *not* to act is as legitimate an outcome of decision-making processes as to resolve to act.

Also, the 'impact' of research outputs in decision making includes the individuals who participate in the process. It involves their education and training, their research skills and attitudes. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, just as the input of research-based information into the decision-making process is only one of a number of information sources, so too do decision makers draw upon their experience, judgment and other personal attributes, as well as on their education and training, their research skills and attitudes, in making decisions.

2.4 Vocational education and training

There is no common or agreed definition of 'vocational education and training' and the boundaries between the VET sector and other education and training sectors are blurred.

The project team adopted the use of the term as commonly used and understood, so that vocational education is defined as all formal post-school education which prepares students for (or further develops their skills in) a specific vocation or for work generally, up to and including the level of paraprofessional occupations.³ 'Training' has been taken to include both on-the-job and off-the-job training to a similar level.⁴

3. SCOPE OF PROJECT

3.1 Boundaries of VET research

The project is concerned with the impact of research in VET. Research studies which focus specifically on VET and aspects of it are clearly within the scope of the research project.

³ This definition includes literacy and basic education programs, as they also prepare students for work generally.

⁴ This definition is consistent with that used in McDonald et al. (1993).

There are also studies which focus on issues which relate primarily to other sectors, but where links or applications to VET are also established. The impacts of these studies are included. However, there are some wider studies whose findings could have implications for VET, but which do not draw out these implications. Studies in these categories generally are *not* included.

3.2 Geographical coverage of research

In terms of coverage, the project included:

- work carried out in Australia on Australian VET issues;
- work carried out in Australia on wider or theoretical issues or both where links are drawn with VET; and
- work on VET originating overseas which includes Australian coverage or is directly relevant.

No significance was attached to the particular State or Territory where the research was performed. However, account was taken of the particular organisation in which the research was performed.

3.3 Research time frame

The time frame in which studies were considered as eligible for inclusion in the inventory is necessarily arbitrary, at least in reference to its commencement. We proposed that the starting date be 1987. There had been significant changes in VET since the late 1980s (collectively known as the training reform agenda) and studies commenced since the Australian Council of Trade Unions/Trade Development Council report *Australia Reconstructed* (1987), which had a major influence on the development of the training reform agenda, were included.

3.4 Disciplinary approaches

The literature indicates that there are various approaches to the analysis of 'impact' of research. To the extent that researchers adopt an approach based on a particular academic discipline it can influence the problems identified as important, the key questions posed and the techniques adopted to investigate them. These differences in approach are recognised and were explored as part of the study.

4. RESEARCH AND DECISION MAKING AND ACTION PERSPECTIVES

The relationships between decision making and action on the one hand and research on the other can be considered from two broad perspectives; from the perspective of research or from the perspective of decision making. Our earlier study indicated that the research perspective can narrow the focus of the investigator so that the impact of research is overstated (the 'key hole' problem); such studies tend to focus on the research process and the research outcomes and to underestimate the complexity of the decision-making process.

The same study concluded that, from the perspective of decision making and action, research is only one source of information and information from all sources is only one of a number of possible inputs into decision making. Of course, adoption of this perspective is not intended to imply any denigration of research's other important functions or that research should be subservient to decision making or action. Research has important objectives other than serving policy, especially if the latter is conceived as narrowly instrumental and short term. It may well be that on occasion researchers can best contribute to the development of future policy by presenting challenging and varied points of view.

Generally, the perspective of decision making and action was the primary focus in the project, including in the quantitative studies. However, the project design allowed for the other perspective to be advanced, where relevant. In particular, the symposium provided an opportunity to assess the appropriateness of the perspective which was adopted (see Selby Smith, 1998).

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ATTACHMENT 2: SUGGESTED HEADINGS FOR CONSIDERATION BY CASE STUDY AUTHORS

TITLE; AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Outline principal implications of the case study in the context of the project brief.

1. THE CONTEXT

- (a) **BACKGROUND** - history, structure, broad contextual issues, relevant industry/community views and attitudes.
- (b) **THE ORGANISATIONS** (Decision making and Research) - who; purpose of the organisation; staffing; etc.
- (c) **THE RESEARCH**
 - (i) **CONTEXT** - motivation; funding sources.
 - (ii) **METHODOLOGY** - approaches used, including availability of information.
- (d) **SIGNIFICANCE**
 - why is this case study significant?
 - why were you involved and in what capacity?

2. THE DECISION-MAKING ORGANISATION AND ITS PROCESSES

- (a) **OVERVIEW** - infrastructure; systems; history.
- (b) **ACTIVITIES** - what does the decision-making organisation do?; and how does the organisation operate?
- (c) **DECISION MAKING**
 - who decides?; individual's role(s).
 - what other players were involved (central agencies, lobby groups, industry and community organisations)?
 - what external or unpredictable factors intervened in the decision-making process (in this case or generally)?
- (d) **RESEARCH**
 - understanding of 'research'.
 - past impact and use of research.
 - internal research and data collection; analysis resources.
- (e) **CULTURE** - attitudes and use of research: supportive?; traditions?

3. RELEVANT RESEARCH

- (a) **OVERVIEW** - what was available and/or used?
- (b) **DETAILS** - specifically, what are the details of the research in this instance which *did* or *did not* impact on decision making?
- (c) **DECISION MAKING**
 - What decisions were affected and what were the effects?
 - Why and how did impact occur (or not)?

- Over what time scale did the research (and the research's impact) operate?
- Were community views, attitudes and understanding affected?; if so, how?
- What evidence is there of the impact (especially externally validated evidence)?

4. IMPEDIMENTS TO USING RESEARCH

- What are the main barriers or other difficulties which occurred in this case?
- What lessons should be drawn from this experience, including changes you would make if you were doing it again?

APPENDICES

Any relevant supporting material would be welcome.

Notes:

- (1) In discussion with authors they were encouraged to consider the headings identified here, in order to facilitate comparisons across the different case studies. However, it was recognised that the circumstances of individual case studies could vary substantially and that, as a result, authors might wish to add or elaborate particular matters. Also, given that the authors had often been closely involved in the case study being reported, they were requested, wherever possible, to draw on external supporting evidence concerning the matters which were considered and the conclusions which were drawn.
- (2) Authors were asked to ensure that, as far as possible, their case studies were developed consistently with the definitions and approaches adopted for the overall study (as set out in Attachment 1).
- (3) The suggested headings were first sent to case study authors in May 1997. Subsequent case study authors received the suggested headings in early 1998.

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