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Serving client needs in regional and local communities

Lesley Farrell

Linda Wyse

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Executive summary

This report investigates how, and to what extent training packages are customised at local sites to meet the needs of stakeholders in regional and local communities. It also investigates who the stakeholders in regional communities are, and what they want from training. Whether customising of training packages preserves the portability of the training package is also considered.

These questions are becoming increasingly important for regional communities, as they are for all communities, since the need to maintain a competitive workforce requires a highly mobile, flexible and adaptable workforce, which at the same time, has a specialised and contextualised knowledge of work practices within a given enterprise.

Nearly 80 interviews were conducted with employers, registered training organisations, students and area consultative committees in regional areas across Australia to assist in finding answers to the issues identified above. In most cases, stakeholders familiar with the Agriculture, Aged Care and Tourism Training Packages were interviewed.

Interviews with stakeholders reveal that students are not spontaneously nominated as stakeholders in training. This has important implications for the manner in which their interests are accommodated within regional vocational education and training systems.

The research found that customisation of training packages involves complex collaboration and negotiation between the competing interests of stakeholder groups. However, while the research demonstrates that this can be achieved, it rarely happens. When it is successful, it is often expensive for all parties and is dependent on the commitment and skills of individual teachers. Moreover, when customisation of training packages takes place, there is concern that the portability of the package is diminished. A major challenge identified through this research is the need to maintain portability, while at the same time customising competencies to meet the specific needs of local contexts.

Generally, it was found that, while some communities consciously and actively 'manage' the tensions between stakeholder needs, between the need for generic and specific skills, between the demands of the local community and national and global interests, and between immediate and future needs, most do not consciously do so.

The report contains several suggestions for a range of stakeholders endeavouring to accommodate the requirements of a range of clients in regional and local communities.

Introduction

Purpose of the study

This project forms part of an ongoing process of improvement in the implementation of training packages across Australia. The outcomes of the research, which has examined the extent to which training packages are meeting client needs in local and regional communities, will inform policy and planning at regional, and state and territory levels.

Workers in all regions need access to learning opportunities in order to meet the demands of specific enterprises and industry sectors. Workers must also, however, be trained to operate in an enterprise/industry as it adapts in response to technological developments, and to pressures arising from both the domestic and global economies. Central to this project therefore, was an examination of how the various stakeholders, as providers and consumers of vocational education and training (VET), understood and managed these contradictions and tensions.

These inherent contradictions are enacted within two key, but interconnected arenas, namely, that of the economy, and that of education and training. This requires constant juggling and adjustment to meet the pull of local and international economic forces and the demands for teaching, learning and application of generic and specific skills, resulting in tensions between the competing needs and agendas of different stakeholders. Thus, the key issues in relation to this project centre around the need to customise training to meet local needs, yet maintain portability of qualifications to meet the demand for a flexible, multiskilled and mobile workforce.

Definitional issues

Before examining how training packages meet needs at local and regional sites, it is important to establish what is meant by some of the understandings which underpin the research. Key amongst these are terms such as ‘customisation’ and ‘contextualisation’, ‘portability’ and ‘transferability’.

According to the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), training packages provide a consistent and reliable set of nationally endorsed components for training and assessing peoples’ skills ... Training packages define a range of pathways, by which people can learn on the job, be formally trained and achieve a national qualification. (Dawe 2002)

Competency standards, one of the three components of training packages, define the skills, knowledge and attitudes required for effective performance in the workplace. These relate to an industry as a whole and need to be interpreted to reflect a specific worksite.

Customisation and contextualisation

As the terms ‘customisation’ and ‘contextualisation’ appeared to be used interchangeably, it was important to have an operational definition of the terms to ensure that there was a shared understanding by all participants in the research of what was being discussed.

There was general agreement that the term ‘customisation’ referred primarily to the adaptation of training to meet the needs of specific enterprises. This view was supported by the then Australian National Training Authority definition which stated that:

Customisation involves the addition of specific industry or enterprise information to endorsed national competency standards to reflect the work of a particular industry or enterprise.
(ANTA 1999, p.27)

Towards the completion of the project, advice was received from ANTA (December 2002), that the handbook was being amended, and because of the confusion between the terms, 'customisation' and 'contextualisation', reference to customisation will be deleted and only the term 'contextualisation' will be used. As the advice from ANTA noted:

Providers may contextualise units of competency to suit a particular method of delivery, the learner, specific enterprise requirement or local need. This contextualisation however must be within the bounds of the advice provided in the Training Package. In that process additional requirements may be inserted in the unit to reflect local outcomes required.

However, as this advice was not available at the commencement of the project, the researchers worked with both terms. We saw customisation as a broad concept addressing two critical areas: firstly, the needs of a specific enterprise and secondly, the needs of learners within that enterprise. Our aim was to focus on the needs of both the enterprise and the learner. Although the original ANTA definition did refer to the need to customise to meet the needs of particular clients, clients could simply be read as enterprises and not necessarily as learners. It therefore seemed useful to describe the pedagogical adjustments which teachers/trainers make to meet the realities of individual learners through the use of the term 'contextualisation'. The need to focus on all aspects of the learning experience is emphasised in recent research undertaken by Kilpatrick, Falk and Hamilton. They state that 'the quality of the learner's experience necessitates attention to all aspects shaping the learning experience' (2002, p.2). By overtly drawing a distinction between customisation and contextualisation, we were hoping to draw attention to the complexity of the learning environment.

In this project therefore, the term 'customisation' was used to refer to the modification of units of competence to reflect local outcomes, whereas 'contextualisation' was used to refer to the process of adapting learning and teaching resources to meet the needs of participants within a specific context. This approach considers both specific enterprise requirements and the learning needs and backgrounds of participants and the pedagogical implications of these. These working definitions were discussed with the advisory group which confirmed the usefulness of the distinction.

Workplaces are not static entities. Learners and teachers/trainers change their understandings and perspectives through their experiences, so customising and contextualising must be an ongoing process throughout the life of a project. An employer in the Gippsland region provided an example of how she needed to contextualise the on-the-job training to meet the needs of an Indigenous trainee. He was the only Indigenous trainee in that section of the workplace and was finding the adjustment difficult for a number of reasons. As this was his first job and he had a number of family commitments, he was not sure how to balance what he saw as competing demands for his time. His supervisor suggested they draw up a log where he could keep a record of his hours, thus allowing him some control over his working life. In addition, he found it difficult to work for a female supervisor. Again, the supervisor realised the need to make adjustments to meet the needs of this trainee. She discussed with him how to address this issue, with the outcome that he now spends some of his time in another section where he works for a male supervisor.

Portability and transferability

'Portability' refers to the national recognition of formal qualifications. 'Transferability' refers to the ability to apply skills and knowledge in different contexts.

Research questions

In order to determine the extent to which providers are using training packages to meet the needs of client groups in local and regional communities, the research covered four key questions:

1. Who are the stakeholders and what do they want?
 - ✧ Do they vary according to different communities and groups of stakeholders?
 - ✧ How well do providers meet these needs?
 - ✧ Are groups with particular needs, such as seasonal workers, catered for?
2. How and to what extent are training packages customised at local sites to meet the needs of stakeholders?
 - ✧ What factors impact on the ability of providers to deliver training that reflects the needs of groups in regional communities?
 - ✧ What skills are especially important in specific regional areas?
 - ✧ Are there new skills that are seen as particularly important by stakeholders in regional areas?
 - ✧ What do providers understand by customising and contextualising?
3. To what extent are providers packaging competency standards to allow for cross-industry qualifications?
4. Does the customising of training packages preserve portability and opportunity to gain higher levels of skills and qualifications?

Reading the report

The literature review frames the theoretical underpinnings of the project as well as identifying a number of issues that have bearing on the key questions. Recent and relevant literature has been analysed through:

- ✧ the global perspective and its impact on local and regional communities
- ✧ identifying stakeholders
- ✧ the siting of knowledge as local and social.

The chapter entitled 'Research methods' describes the approach taken to the design, collection and analysis of data. The project is qualitative in nature. As there are a number of stakeholders with potentially contradictory and conflicting needs and agendas, this methodology allows for a range of voices to be heard.

The third chapter, 'Findings', reviews and analyses the data by addressing each of the four questions in turn. Each is structured to address the issues through the voices of the key stakeholders within the context of the theoretical underpinnings.

The final chapter pulls together the many and complex web of issues and points the way to further research that will enable some of these issues to be addressed in more detail.

Literature review

Introduction

All over the world, work-related education is marked by tensions between the often competing needs and desires of stakeholders, and between the apparent need for customisation, or ‘specific’ skills, on the one hand, and portability, or ‘generic’ skills, on the other. An overarching research question is, therefore: How are these tensions managed at individual local sites?

This project begins to address this question by focussing on four research questions:

- ✧ Who are the stakeholders, and what do they want?
- ✧ How, and to what extent, are training packages customised at local sites to meet the needs of stakeholders
- ✧ To what extent are providers packaging competency standards to allow for cross-industry qualifications?
- ✧ Does the customisation of training packages preserve portability and opportunity to gain higher levels of skills and qualifications?

In reviewing the literature we focus first on describing the global context within which local and regional communities and economies are situated and identifying stakeholders at local, regional, national and international levels. We then review research which sheds light on how generic and specific skills are understood, and what this means for the portability of skill across industries and regions.

Context: Knowledge and skill in a ‘new’ economy

Four features of contemporary economies have a direct bearing on the ways in which skills are developed in our local and regional communities.

First, knowledge and skill drive economic success, for nations, organisations and individuals, in ways that have not been so obvious before (Castells 1996). While all economies are and have always been, knowledge-based, contemporary economies are held to be different because it is the demand for new knowledge that actually drives the economy:

What characterises the current technological revolution is not the centrality of knowledge and information, but the application of such knowledge and information to knowledge generation and information processing/communication devices, in a cumulative feedback loop between innovation and the uses of innovation. (Castells 1996)

However, as Buchanan et al. (2001) argue, this does not mean that training efforts should be focussed exclusively on so called ‘high skill’ industry sectors, particularly those associated with communication technologies. While these sectors are important ‘engines of growth’, they will never employ large numbers of people or meet the needs of a civil society.

Second, new economies demand specialised skills for globalised niche markets, but those niche markets change rapidly and products and skills often date quickly. Knowledge and skills must be

continuously maintained and adapted if they are to keep pace with the relentless innovation that the new economy demands. This rate of change may have an impact on the kinds of skill that people need to operate effectively in workplaces. While specialised, contextualised working knowledge remains critically important, many argue that it is increasingly mediated by the more tacit, harder-to-define skills associated with communication, problem-solving and decision-making (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Davenport & Prusak 1998; Blundell et al. 1999; Farrell 2001). In this context, also, workers are expected to engage in training throughout their working lives (Robinson & Arthy 1998). Mulcahy and James (1998) argue that employees are not only expected to train throughout their lives, they are also expected to take responsibility for managing their own training. When Davenport and Prusak argue that '[e]mployees who are willing and able to learn new things are vital to an adapting company (1998, p.65), they are articulating a widely held view amongst academics and policy-makers that 'learning is the new form of labour' (Zuboff 1988).

Third, workforces are increasingly mobile and contingent. This is partly because the development of digital communications technologies means that large corporations can and do locate different aspects of their operations in different parts of the country, or the world, and they shift them according to their own corporate logic. It is partly also because casual, part-time and short-term contract work is increasing in many parts of the world (Weber 1993; Harrison 1994; Hooguelst & Yuasa 1994; Gee et al. 1996; Payne 2001), including Australia (Marginson 2000). A mobile and contingent workforce is not available for traditional delivery of formal training in the ways that a more stable workforce might be, and it is not immediately clear what training is appropriate. While employers need a trained workforce, they might be less inclined to pay for the training when they believe they are unlikely to reap the benefits in the medium to long term.

Fourth, the working groups in which novice workers were traditionally inducted into the practices of specific workplaces, often understood as 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1999; Hildreth & Kimble 2000) are increasingly geographically and temporally dispersed. Companies employ fewer people and work groups, or teams, are not necessarily located in the same physical location and they may be in a different time zone as well. As Gee (1997) argues, this means that there are fewer and fewer opportunities for people to engage in extended work practice with each other. This has implications for the development of specialised and contextualised skills because employees have traditionally developed their contextualised skills through 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Wenger 1999) by working alongside more experienced workers.

Knowledge and skill clearly matter, probably more than ever, but what knowledge, and which skills, for which individuals, enterprises, industries and nations? In these circumstances it is difficult to know how to identify and promote the highly contextualised, often tacit, knowledge and skills that local enterprises demand, while at the same time ensuring that the skills people develop are durable in globalising labour markets which may find people working in a variety of sectors and a range of locations over their working lives. In this project we focus on the ways that the competing demands of stakeholders for customisation and for portability are negotiated and implicated at specific local sites.

Who are the stakeholders and what do they want?

Identifying stakeholders in global economies

It is not a simple matter to determine which interest groups have a legitimate interest in influencing the shape, focus and content and delivery of work-related education and training, or to determine how those sometimes competing interests should be balanced or negotiated in particular local communities.

Students, those who are new to the industry, those who wish to refresh their skills, those who wish to change industries and those who wish to re-enter the workforce, and potential students clearly have an interest (Hull 1997; Billett & Hayes 2000; Virgona et al. 2003) as do training organisations, local and national industry groups (Ball, Saunders & Hargreaves 2001; Stevenson 1996; Australian Agribusiness Group 2001) and professional and trade associations.

Local and regional communities also have an interest at least insofar as the skills and skill levels of the local workforce influence the extent to which growth industries might find the region attractive for investment and development (Australian Agribusiness Group 1999) and, more broadly, insofar as they build community (Falk & Kilpatrick 1999).

Individual local employers also clearly have an interest, as may global corporations which operate outside Australia and outsource production to local enterprises.

While these interests may be asserted through direct representations to governments and policy-makers, they are likely to be asserted more obliquely, through the demands of in-house qualifications and training programs and sometimes through nationally mandated or enterprise-based quality assurance procedures (eds Lesser & Fontaine 2000; Farrell 2001a, 2001b). When training packages are delivered in these contexts, trainers may be encouraged to at least attempt to meet local and global assessment demands simultaneously. Globally organised industries may also indirectly influence education and training outcomes through international standards regimes like the International Standards Organisation.

Schofield (1999) argues persuasively that there is also a public interest in work-related education that goes beyond the pragmatic need for a skilled workforce and extends to the maintenance of the social fabric and the building of community.

Generic skill and customised skill

Debate about the definition and relative value of generic skills and customised skills is complicated, and relevant to this study only insofar as it helps us to understand what the implications of customisation are for the various stakeholders. Kearns (2000) distinguishes between what he nominates as the Anglo-Australian model, which offers a 'more narrowly focussed and instrumental set of key skills' and the American model which 'involves a broader, more flexible and more holistic set of generic skills' (p.4), including personal attributes. In the literature, the term 'generic skill' is taken to cover 'key competencies', 'soft skills' and, more recently 'employability skills'. Generally speaking, these skills are taken to be either macro-cognitive skills (like the capacity of learning to learn) or, more commonly, skills associated with values, dispositions and orientations which accrue to the person (like smiling in such a way as to indicate a customer service orientation). The distinguishing feature of 'employability skills' is, according to Curtis and McKenzie (2001), that employability is oriented to the future labor market rather than to the current market and 'implies qualities of resourcefulness, adaptability and flexibility' (p.6).

So, while the idea of transferable, or 'generic', skills is an attractive one, especially in an industrial context in which flexibility is highly valued, it remains unclear which skills, if any, are generic, which generic skills are highly valued, and by whom, and what kind of learning is required to enable workers to effectively transfer skills from one context to another (ed Stevenson 1996; Down 1997). On the one hand, according to Keating (2002), the Mayer key competencies (a comprehensive and systematic account of generic transferable, skills) appear to have been perceived as not valuable by employers and training providers alike, and to have made little obvious impact in the VET sector. On the other hand, research undertaken by Business Skills Victoria (2001) articulates the view held by some employers, at least, that it is the role of formal training to develop key generic skills, especially interpersonal skills and personal attributes, while technical skills are best developed at the local site. In a detailed review of the role of industry in leading the VET system, the Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission (2002) seems to

support this position, arguing that any industry advisory system must be 'better able to cope with cross industry skill issues as generic and employability skills become relevant' (p.1).

Stevenson (1996) argues that the idea of generic skills has very restricted usefulness, on the basis that learning is never value-free, that all learning is situated and that:

while it may be possible conceptually to abstract a generic label for a set of site specific capacities with superficial similarities (eg numeracy, literacy, problem solving, use of technology), at this level such entities are not the concrete or functional capacities that individuals actually use. (ed Stevenson 1996, pp.2-3)

Mulcahy and James (1998), while accepting the concept of generic skills generally, argue that their research suggests that training packages are effective in developing technical skills, but they may not be effective in developing generic skills.

In what might at first seem to be a contradictory argument, Gee et al. suggest that all work-related skills are generic, that, 'Learning and working are conflating more and more ... learning a job and doing a job are practically synonymous (1996, p.165). They are pointing to the relentlessly transforming nature of the contemporary workplace, and suggesting that it is the way we view skill development that is critical, rather than the arbitrary categorisation of skills as generic or specific. Virgona et al. (2003) take up this position, arguing persuasively that practitioners and policy-makers start from different assumptions, and therefore mean different things, when they talk about generic skills. They are operating in different discourses:

The distinction between the abstract conceptualisation which makes sense only at a distance and the actual functional capacities utilised on the job is important. The former abstraction is the generic competence as it is understood by policy-makers and the latter is that which must be appreciated by VET practitioners. Thus, even when using the same label, VET policy-makers and practitioners may be talking about quite different constructions or conceptions. In the Australian context, training packages sit astride these different discourses. They are at once both the instruments and embodiments of policy and the tools of practice.

(Virgona et al. 2003, p.15)

They call on Cornford (2001), who argues that generic skills tend to be viewed from the perspective of the employer, with very little account taken of what it takes to make a skill transferable. In particular, they note that policy documents tend to be silent on the demanding role of the workplace educator in making skills transferable, and draw attention to what Cornford and others, including Harris and Simons (1999), regard as inadequate minimum qualifications of workplace educators. Dawe (2002), in her review of generic skills in training packages, argues that professional development for workplace educators is critical if students are to be able to transfer learned skills to new contexts.

Knowledge and skill as local and social

Current research emphasises two characteristics of working knowledge relevant to this project: its construction as 'local' in the sense that generalised knowledge is enacted and given meaning only at a particular time and in a particular place, and its construction as 'social' in the sense that people make knowledge together while they are engaged in formal, or more often informal, collaborative projects.

Critical to arguments about the extent to which skill can be transferred from one context to another is the literature on working knowledge as 'situated' at local sites (for example, Lave 1993; Wenger 1999). The argument here is that knowledge only ever really comes to count when it is called on in specific local contexts, that neither knowledge nor context is stable. Each context, or situation, is a subtly (or more obviously) unique configuration of people, events, things etc., and new knowledge emerges, or is made, to deal with these unique conditions. Engestrom (1999) argues that learning in workplaces always goes beyond what is already known; it is 'expansive', bringing established knowledge into conversation with new conditions to make new knowledge that meets

the unique demands of the situation. In fact, it is the 'difference' inherent in the situation that promotes learning because it demands that the learner identify what is distinctive about the situation in which they find themselves. Within this framework, knowledge and skill are regarded as primarily social achievements (Deetz 1995; eds Engestrom & Middleton 1996; Davenport & Prusak 1998; Ezzamel & Willmott 1998). These researchers focus on the way in which a skilful performance of a task relies on learners negotiating between what they know and can do as individuals, what their colleagues know and can do, and the specific demands of the workplace context (see for instance Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). This literature strongly suggests that the issues of situated learning and effective customisation and contextualisation of training packages are likely to be critical elements in the delivery of effective training. Calling on this and other literature, Down (2001) has developed a model of learning transfer that describes the processes by which an individual comes to the stage where they can mobilise existing knowledge to make judgments about a new situation without recourse to specific teaching.

What is clear from this research is that any discussion of how and when skills might be transferable needs to make explicit the model of knowledge and learning that is being invoked (precisely what skill is taken to be transferred), and the kind of pedagogical practice being supported.

The challenge for regional and local communities

The tension between the need for specialised training and the need for a flexible and adaptable local workforce plays out in particular ways in regional communities. Falk et al. (2001) identify critical issues in the provision of VET in regional Australia. Key amongst these is the need for collaboration between stakeholders, and local planning and involvement to ensure the needs of local communities are met. Collaboration may be easier said than done. Billett and Hayes (2000) argue that there has been a shift to customise to the needs of enterprises, to the possible detriment of the individual, the industry and the region. Emphasis on the immediate, felt needs of enterprises can result in short-term, highly localised skill development, rather than skill development for the longer term at the level of the industry, region or individual. They argue that an exclusive enterprise focus may lead to:

low levels of course completion, enterprise specific curricula, some individuals' career aspirations being frustrated, few strategic concerns associated with a skilled workforce being met. (Billett & Hayes 2000, p.vi)

They identify a strong view from enterprises that customisation involves tying knowledge learnt to the direct, specific and immediate needs of the enterprise, and ensuring that the knowledge is securely embedded in the organisational structure of the enterprise.

Most enterprises proposed direct negotiations with providers as being the best way to address their short-term and long-term VET needs. The purpose of these negotiations would be for providers to develop an intimate knowledge of enterprise needs in order to customize curriculum. There was little recognition from enterprises of the value of reciprocal arrangements that seek to understand the constraints on providers. Despite calls for flexibility, enterprise needs of VET processes and outcomes were quite rigid; with calls to suit specific enterprise needs. (Billett & Hayes 2000, p.vii)

Rural communities, especially those relying largely on agriculture, have another layer of complexity. While industry in general is increasingly reliant on short-term contract and casual workers, farm work is almost exclusively part-time and discontinuous. This has implications for farmers' commitment to training beyond the training of family members. The Australian Agribusiness Group (2001) reports that:

... while farmers are able to capture the return on their own training and that of family members, many are unable to capture the long-term return on investment in the training of employees because few farms are able to employ people continuously or on a fulltime basis. (Australian Agribusiness Group 2001, p.17)

It is not surprising, then, that agricultural workers have one of the lowest levels of accredited training of any occupational group. One solution to this problem is to promote more generic, cross-sectoral training which would provide a 'portfolio' qualification which exploits the seasonal quality of agricultural activity:

The industry has identified a need for cross-sector industry training, as many casual or seasonal jobs could be transformed into multi-skilled full-time jobs if people have been trained across occupations such as shearing, shed hands, pruners, fruit and vegetable pickers and packers. Training programs are required in basic skills across industry sectors. A 'generic' pass or skill passport could be used to identify and confirm existing training in these basic skills.

(Australian Agribusiness Group 2001, p.19)

Such a proposal may build a more highly trained agriculture workforce but it does so at the expense of the highly customised approach to training that farmers presently require.

The seasonal nature of agriculture work has implications for families and for local and regional communities. Breadwinners, and sometimes whole families, must move locations in order to obtain work, disrupting family and friendship support networks, the schooling of children and the formal education and training of adults. Local and regional policy and planning are difficult when the population is constantly in flux. One solution to this problem may be to provide certain forms of cross-industry training (agriculture and tourism, say) which could allow a family to stay in one location. The Certificate of Rural Operations developed in Burnie, Tasmania is an example of an early attempt to provide a robust, industry-specific base to a more flexible qualification incorporating relevant skills in other industries. It relies on the willingness of agriculture employers to take significant formal responsibility for the training of their seasonal workers.

Training packages: Building local capacity in a globalising labour market

Although training packages are reviewed on a three-year cycle involving an extensive consultation process, there is, as yet, relatively little systematic documented research on the national implementation of training packages. The literature we have located understandably focusses on the complexity of providing a training framework which is predictable and stable, and so provides the advantages of portability of qualification and articulation into a national qualifications framework, while at the same time allowing the flexible teaching of skills that are really usable in local contexts. Billett (1999) identifies the tensions between the demands of a national system which centralises the development of certain standards and the demands of individual workplaces for individual performance requirements. Mulcahy (1999) notes that training packages are effective in developing procedural, operational and technical skills but less so in developing generic skills. A number of researchers note that the quality and effectiveness of learning depends heavily on the capacity of the teachers to tailor their teaching to their class (Billet 1999; Mulcahy 1999; Smith 1999; Kilpatrick, Falk & Hamilton 2002). In a recent study, Dawe (2002) looked at generic skills through an analysis of ten training packages. As well as identifying three common generic skills, she noted that what was critical was good teaching practice which was 'based on the provision of a large variety of experiences and learning strategies' (p.5).

However, Ball, Saunders and Hargreaves (2001) in their report on training in rural industries, identified a need for cross-occupational training to meet the needs of seasonal and casual workers. They argue that 'under the provisions for customisation of training packages this type of cross-industry training is easier to organise'. The Business Skills Victoria report lists key generic competencies identified by employers and maps these against four specific training packages. Although three of these did not systematically address the employability skills identified by the employers surveyed, the Community Services and Health Training Package was seen to integrate many of them in the core competencies. This does imply that some training packages aim to

facilitate the teaching of generic skills. The authors also indicate that there can be a tension between the need to use national training packages and developing courses customised for local markets.

These general views are elaborated in the conclusions reached in the more specific report on VET and Indigenous communities: *Djama and VET* (1998, pp.98–101). Six key areas for development are identified:

- ✧ culturally appropriate VET delivery in rural and remote Aboriginal communities
- ✧ partnerships between providers and Aboriginal client enterprises in VET delivery in rural and remote Aboriginal communities
- ✧ workplace learning as a key component of VET delivery in rural and remote Aboriginal communities
- ✧ customisation of training responses appropriate to Aboriginal client training needs through flexible training responses based on workplace learning and networking between providers and Aboriginal enterprises
- ✧ quality student support and learning management systems involving client–provider agreements, workplace learning, on-site and off-site trainers and tutors, and interactive communication technologies
- ✧ provider and client staff development to support partnership-driven VET focussed on workplace learning.

Conclusion

The focus of this study is on how local communities are managing demands on training. While we are centrally concerned with the ways in which local stakeholders negotiate the competing claims of customisation on the one hand, and transferability on the other, our aim is to begin to understand this process as part of larger global economic movements, as part of local social practice, and through the lens of cognition and learning theory.

Research methods

This chapter contains a synopsis of the methodology. More detail can be found in appendix 1.

Research approach

As there has been limited research conducted to date in relation to this area of study, substantial emphasis has been placed on the need to obtain qualitative data in order to gain rich and detailed information. While the use of a series of research prompts allowed for the collection of some quantitative data, the sample population was too small to be statistically significant. From a methodological perspective therefore, the emphasis has been on the collection of in-depth information, or ‘cases’ gathered from a select number of respondents occurring within two distinct phases.

The use of case studies is a powerful research tool when the research is concerned, as it is here, with experiences and practices which can be viewed from a number of perspectives and where those perspectives may be conflicting or contradictory. However, while this approach allows for a range of voices to be heard, no one case is exactly the same as another case. The ability to draw generalisations is therefore limited. Gaining an in-depth understanding of the impact of various factors on a particular site may alert us to issues that may need to be considered in similar environments.

To support the flow of the report, the data collected from the case studies were integrated into the body of the report rather than presented as three separate case studies.

Research design

Data collection occurred within two distinct phases. In order to gain an overall picture of the factors impacting on the way that the VET system addresses client needs in local and regional communities, telephone interviews were conducted in selected regions across Australia. Key issues were highlighted to allow for more detailed examination to occur through the case studies.

Phase 1

This phase of the data collection involved a series of 50 telephone interviews. These were designed to provide snapshots of the issues surrounding training package implementation as identified by a range of stakeholders in selected regional areas across Australia.

Phase 2

Having gained an overview of the issues across regional Australia, more detailed information was sought through the conduct of three case studies. The case studies were used to provide accounts of the ways in which specific regions with specific needs, resources and concerns manage the competing pressures of specialisation (customisation and contextualisation), flexibility and adaptability.

Sample collection

Selection of regions

One region was elected from each state or territory with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory.

Selection of stakeholders

The following groups of stakeholders were identified:

- ✧ providers, including technical and further education (TAFE) institutes, private providers, group training companies, adult and community education (ACE) providers, VET in Schools providers
- ✧ area consultative committee (ACC) members
- ✧ employers
- ✧ students, both current and past.

Selection of training packages

To enable analysis of sites in relation to each other, it was agreed with the advisory committee to focus on a limited number of training packages. Training packages were selected according to their spread and uptake in regional areas. Three training packages with broad coverage were identified. These were:

- ✧ Agriculture
- ✧ Aged Care
- ✧ Tourism

Interviews

Interviews were initially conducted over the phone and then face to face in the second phase.

Telephone interviews

Fifty telephone interviews were conducted in the following regions:

- ✧ New South Wales: Wagga
- ✧ Northern Territory: Katherine
- ✧ Queensland: Ipswich
- ✧ South Australia: Port Lincoln
- ✧ Tasmania: Burnie
- ✧ Victoria: Morwell
- ✧ Western Australia: Broome

Case studies

Twenty-seven interviews were conducted in the following regions:

- ✧ Broome
- ✧ Morwell
- ✧ Port Lincoln

Framework for analysis

Transcripts were made of the taped telephone and face-to-face interviews.

An interview data form (see appendix 4) was developed for the telephone interviews which allowed for analysis of findings in relation to the interview prompts.

As the face-to-face interviews explored issues relevant to the specific site and context, the semi-structured interview format was not used. After the interviews were transcribed, responses were grouped according to the four main research questions. Themes and issues arising from the data were identified and used as the organising constructs for discussion of the data in the report.

Issues with the methodology

Comparison of data across regions

While every attempt was made to maintain parity in terms of the number of respondents across categories, this did not happen. In some areas, it was simply not possible to make contact, and in others, potential respondents were not always able to participate.

Students

Two critical issues in relation to using students were identified. First of all, it was extremely difficult to contact students, both current and past. Depending on providers to arrange student contact was problematic since we were reliant on providers having the time to organise the contact. Teachers/trainers are under pressure in their daily work lives, and although some did intend to make these links, could not do so in the timeframe. Moreover, we had no control over who was asked to participate, and it is possible that we did not achieve a cross-section of students as respondents.

The second issue relates to the sense of loyalty students often feel towards their teacher. This may affect their responses as they do not want to appear critical to an outsider.

Establishing telephone contacts

The identification of potential telephone respondents proved an extremely time-consuming process. There were a number of reasons for this:

- ✧ The National Training Information System site contains names of providers registered to deliver qualifications within a training package but this does not mean that they are currently delivering. Also, a provider may be registered to deliver in a particular state, but may in fact be delivering in another state.
- ✧ Participating in interviews is not a critical issue for people other than the researchers. In a number of cases, participants from all stakeholder groups had agreed to participate, but when the researcher rang to conduct the interview, people were too busy or had forgotten.
- ✧ Employers in particular, wanted to know what was in it for them.

Findings

Introduction

This chapter is organised around the four principal research questions. A summary of the findings introduces each question. The summary is followed by a more detailed account of the range of responses, analysed by category (employer, provider etc.). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the major themes arising from the interview data.

Research question 1: Who are the stakeholders and what do they want?

This research question was concerned with identifying stakeholder groups, the extent to which needs varied across stakeholder groups and communities, the extent to which needs were met for stakeholders and communities, and the extent to which the needs of particular groups are catered for.

In many respects it is a simple matter to identify stakeholders in the delivery of training in local and rural communities. The literature made frequent reference to employers, providers, the 'industry' and the 'community'. Specific groups of students for example, Indigenous students, seasonal workers, non-English speaking background (NESB) students were also identified in the literature. Each of these groups was nominated as a stakeholder by at least one of our participants. The reason for asking this question was not, however, to provide an exhaustive list of stakeholders but, rather, to get an idea of how stakeholders and their interests are represented in different local communities and across categories. It was also important to determine the extent to which stakeholders' expressed interests were shared, and the extent to which they were conflicting. It was considered that stakeholders may have different emphases, so it was important to determine how these differences were managed at specific local sites.

The following stakeholders were identified by participants in phases one and two of the study:

- ✧ *Employers* are identified as the critical stakeholders in the delivery of training across all communities. Providers aim to be responsive to the expressed needs of employers, within the pragmatic constraints set by the training packages, funding regimes, institutional imperatives and other government guidelines.
- ✧ *Local communities* were acknowledged as stakeholders by all categories of participants, but generally in passing. Training needs were identified as part of an overall development strategy in published local government development plans and similar documents.
- ✧ *The industry* was identified as a stakeholder by all categories of participant, although there was no clear agreement about what might constitute 'the industry', and sometimes participants expressed scepticism about who spoke for the industry. Sometimes 'the industry' was taken to be local employers, sometimes it was taken to be national in orientation. Rarely, 'the industry' was understood to be international, either in terms of markets or in terms of quality assurance regulation.

- ✧ *Students* were most commonly understood to be stakeholders when they were owner–operators or currently working in the field. Potential students were rarely mentioned. Employment agency staff identified unemployed workers as potential students whose requirements were generally not considered in negotiations about training, especially in relation to the packaging of training programs. Indigenous students studying with the specific support of Indigenous programs were identified as a special and instructive category of stakeholder. Seasonal workers were generally not identified as stakeholders by respondents, even in areas where seasonal work, and seasonal industries, are important.
- ✧ *Providers* are identified as stakeholders by all groups, but are generally referred to as individual organisations rather than as an interest group.

Federal and state governments, primarily although not exclusively through the Australian National Training Authority and unions, through the enterprise bargaining process clearly have an interest but seemed to us to be a different order of stakeholder from the others identified. This view was born out in this study in that only one respondent mentioned union involvement, and then only in passing. Governments and unions do not, therefore, feature as stakeholders in local and regional communities in this study, although their deliberations and actions clearly provide many of the parameters within which other stakeholders negotiate their claims.

In general, respondents differed with regard to the level of customisation they considered appropriate and the extent to which transferability and portability were viewed as desirable and possible. This was the case both within and between categories. These views extended across the range of training packages.

- ✧ Many, but not all, employers required a high degree of customisation with regard to modes, times and places of delivery of training packages and most of our employer respondents believed that training packages allowed for this.
- ✧ Most providers placed a very high priority on customising training to meet employers' needs in this regard. Funding regimes were cited as the single most critical factor in limiting the options for the delivery of training and the packaging of training modules and development of pathways.
- ✧ Students' needs varied and the needs of some groups of students (notably seasonal workers and young people who were out of school and out of work) were not generally adequately met, or even identified.
- ✧ There was a wide range of views about the extent to which skills were transferable across workplaces and between related industries. Employers as a group expressed the greatest reservations about transferability, except in relation to highly regulated practices like occupational health and safety.
- ✧ The portability of qualifications was viewed as largely irrelevant by many employers, and providers reported that students were interested in specific units of packages (or skills) rather than modules or certificates. 'It is the skill they want, not the qualification!'

Employers

Do stakeholder needs vary?

In this study the employers who agreed to be interviewed were generally owner–operators or government organisations. In the communities we studied, these forms of business operation were prevalent. Nonetheless, other forms of business did have a presence in the communities. It is not clear that large-scale employers, like international agribusinesses, for instances, would hold the same views as owner–operators. In some cases their views may be more clearly represented in the views of area consultative councils (see below).

It was generally agreed that employers are the major stakeholders in local training ecosystems. This view is particularly pronounced where owner–operators dominate, as is the case in agriculture, and the potentially distinctive interests of employer and student are somewhat obscured:

Stakeholders in an agricultural context will be ... the most important is obviously the end user, which is our client. So the primary producers out in the field, I guess, practising people and obviously the links there with the businesses with perhaps the people that own the businesses but don't necessarily work them. (Provider, agriculture)

Generally speaking, when providers talked about employers, they had a particular model of employer in mind. The provider above, for instance, worked almost exclusively with farm owner–operators and, although she acknowledges other models of agricultural businesses (national and international agribusinesses, for instance, who 'own the business but don't necessarily work them'), they do not really feature on her landscape.

Overall, employer respondents wanted training packages customised to the demands of their workplaces, although the level of specificity varied. In aged care, for instance, there was a recurring plea for more and more specialised training in the management of dementia. For one employer this was an immediate and urgent concern:

We actually currently have three aggressive men so we need to provide our staff with the knowledge and skills to be able to deal with those behaviours.

They do cover dementia in the Aged Care Training Package, so they have a little bit of knowledge on dementia. And I guess it is like most things, until you actually experience working in those areas, it is probably that's when you really begin to learn.

(Employer, aged care)

Other employers were less concerned about training meeting immediate skill needs within the organisation but far more concerned about training providing an understanding of 'the industry' as they understood it. The aged care employer below, for instance, was concerned that the Community Services Training Package did not attend sufficiently to the distinctive requirements of residential aged care:

I was doing stuff with a fellow in Victoria who was doing community services—the Aged Care Training Package, he had never heard of the *Aged Care Act* ... I tell everybody that they need to get more about the documentation and the *Aged Care Act* and the principles of accreditation into the actual package. (Employer, aged care)

Other employers focussed less on the substantive content of the training and more on the extent to which training was customised to their own practices and equipment:

It was very well customised actually, so it worked well. We could sort of review that and really work very closely with the trainer that we had in here to get what we wanted out of it. Yes. And used our existing infrastructure like the systems that were used in the office, used those to actually produce the information that we needed. Say for assignments and assessments and things like that, we were actually able to use our computers in the way that we use them every day to produce the results, which was great. (Employer, tourism)

On the other hand, a minority of employers we interviewed actively sought more generic, or 'basic', training for their staff, preferring to take responsibility for inducting employees into the particular practices of their workplace:

I think in our particular case, for the reasons I have just stated, it is very good that it is fairly basic and generic because we can then give them our slant on how we apply that to our business. (Employer, tourism)

In this case the employer chose to have employees study the retail training package, rather than the tourism package, because of the retail package's focus on customer service skills and its more convenient mode of delivery. While they felt that industry knowledge was helpful to them, as owner–operators, they specifically did not require workers who had a broader understanding of the industry:

The course that we [owner–operators] did originally, the Certificate in Travel and Tourism, was probably fairly specific. That was really good for us from a management perspective. But I

think it would have been—like that actually help us set up our business—we knew, we did a lot of legal studies and all sorts of things that we needed to get us started—but I think that would be overkill for the girls when they are also working full time. (Employer, tourism)

A few employers took a broader view, mentioning the demands of a national system, or a rapidly changing industry, and the pragmatic ‘economies of scale in our region’ in evaluating training, and accepted that they would play a role in inducting employees into the specifics of the workplace.

The level of interest in the training packages as learning pathways with a range of portable qualifications varied amongst employers. Most employers claimed only a general knowledge of the relevant training packages at best and some were happy if trained employees could:

learn a little bit more than perhaps we could teach them in the shop. (Employer, tourism)

Others were keen to develop a fully trained and accredited workforce, perhaps because the industry demanded it:

All of our direct care workers sign up when they start with us because we would like all of our workforce to end up with certificate IV at least and so I think we have had—I wouldn’t have accurate numbers here—but I think we have had about roughly 60 that have actually got their certificate and probably the other 60 are either signed up or feel that they didn’t want to. (Employer, aged care)

As part of our accreditation process and because all my employees are carers, they often needed formal ... because the industry is changing so much, people are actually needing formal qualifications that are relevant. And these courses are very relevant from a carer’s perspective. (Employer, aged care)

Nonetheless, very few employers in this study made a contribution to the selection of the electives in the training packages, most preferring to leave the choice up to the provider, or in fewer cases, the student. Providers can find themselves in a bind. While employers are clearly critical stakeholders, and providers try to customise training to their needs, providers don’t always feel that they know what employers want:

I think being able to customise to suit the needs of individual industry stakeholders is a really valuable tool. It is a valuable tool for us in terms of marketing. If we are able to say to an organisation, yes we can deliver this training for your workers under this particular training package taking into account the way you do things and who you provide a service to. I think that is a much easier way of selling our service to them rather than them feel that they are having a particular package imposed on them. They feel that they can have more input. In reality they don’t want to have the input, they want us to tell them what to do, but I think it still is an empowering sort of position for them to have that need met should they need to. (Provider, agriculture)

Employers, then, vary in what they want from training, and from training packages, and in how far they want to be involved in determining the details of the training they offer in their workplaces. Sometimes this variation can be attributed to the conditions pertaining in a particular industry. The aged care employers we interviewed, for instance, generally had very specific requirements covering both content and industry-specific accreditation that may be related to developments in the industry.

How well are these needs being met?

In this study we found no agreement about how effectively employer needs were met, either within the training packages or in the delivery of specific training. Even within an industry, there was little agreement. On the one hand:

I think its an excellent program and I think the students are now getting a lot more time with hands-on prac, so I think that is really much better. (Employer, aged care)

On the other hand:

Its relevance specifically to residential aged care is disgusting. It has got very little relevance, it has no relevance—it covers nothing of the residential classification, it covers nothing of aged care accreditation, and that has been a problem for many years. (Employer, aged care)

We noted that, where employers in any industry had specific needs and felt they were being met, they frequently operated in formal or informal partnership with the provider. One large aged care employer, for instance, valued what carers learned in their training but saw the organisation as continuing training and development on site in a less formal way:

It's a good basis on which to begin, so we can just build on those foundations.

(Employer, aged care)

Similarly, a very small tourism employer worked with the provider to ensure that the whole staff (including himself) undertook the training together on site:

Largely yes, I think [our needs] are [being met]. The only risk in the training package is its practical application, but because we did it in the office here, as a group, we sort of counteracted that.

(Employer, tourism)

One provider felt that, while employers do know what they want—far more context-specific training—the training package is designed with the needs of only one part of the industry in mind, and not the other parts:

As far as the package meeting the needs of the employer goes, no I don't think that the training package does that ... in fact industry when I have spoken to employers and that sort of thing. There are more comments that I get—it is too generic, it is not applicable, it doesn't cover enough of say hands-on skills, there is always irrelevant information in there. I get a sense that even though the package is sort of said to have been developed on industry's advice that there are a lot of people from the coal face industry that really don't understand the package content ... training or anything like that or the structure. That is an interesting concern.

(Provider, aged care)

Students

Do stakeholder needs vary?

This study reinforces the view that students' needs do vary and that the needs of some groups of students are more visible, and so more likely to be met, than other groups in this study. Specifically, students who are currently employed, especially if they are employed in the field in which they are undertaking the training, were seen as stakeholders who could make legitimate claims on the content and mode of delivery of the training. The students we interviewed for this study were either current students or former students currently employed in the field. Potential students, students who may wish to undertake training but who are unaware of it or unable to access it, were not available to interview. This was particularly disappointing in the case of seasonal workers and students who were out of the workforce and out of training. In an attempt to get a sense of what their needs might be, we interviewed employment placement officers in phase two of the study and probed providers about the students who 'weren't there'.

Current and former students in aged care, tourism and agriculture were interviewed. In each case students were sometimes also employers. Generally speaking, the main concern of the students we interviewed was that training be accessible and that, where possible, trainers made links between the training provided and the workplace. Students expressed few specific needs regarding the content of training or the pedagogical practices, although there were difficulties encountered with flexible delivery, particularly internet access and access to libraries in rural areas. Even where the content was not immediately relevant to their situations, most students were happy to learn about the field in general:

Some of it is more for people working in the community, whereas it is different for me working in the home. I don't have to do a lot of the things we are learning because they are more for community workers. But it is good to know them anyway.

(Student, aged care)

Were their needs met?

Given that current and former students expressed few specific needs, it is not surprising that they generally felt their needs to be met. Some students were concerned simply to get the qualification:

I'm interested in caring for the aged and I need to have the certificate to get my foot in the door. (Students, aged care)

Other students were concerned primarily with relevance and hands-on experience. They saw training as meeting their immediate needs:

Its all pretty tailored, and relevant to the realities of owning a farm. (Student–employer, agriculture)

It relates exactly to what I do and what I need to know for the farm. (Student–employer, agriculture)

Students did not talk about training as preparing them for changes in the industry or for changes in employment in their region.

They praised providers for making efforts to link the course content with their current or predicted work situations, for managing the delivery of training to suit their timetables, and for providing support with assignments. Where student support officers were available, students appreciated their presence and thought that they would help meet the assessment demands of the course.

A minority of students were critical of content, largely because they felt it was not new or relevant:

No. I don't think I learnt all that much. I think a lot of it was repetitive from what I'd done before. (Student, tourism)

Generally, students did not regard themselves as having 'special needs' and did not comment on how a student who was not like them would access or experience training.

Are particular groups catered for?

In general we found that some training packages were viewed as implying a 'default' student, a 'typical' student to whom the package was targeted. With regard to the agriculture package, for instance, one provider explained that in his view the original package assumed that the student was a male owner–operator, and it did not cater well to people who did not fit this model. Women farmers, for instance, were seen as being disadvantaged:

I mean the original packaging requirements for qualifications were problematic in that, for example, the higher level business qualification ... required you to still hold these core competencies related to use of chemicals and so on, right? So what happens is, anyway, you've got to, well, particularly a woman working the farm office, that has got all the administration, contributing to decision-making, all that kind of stuff, but never goes out and handles chemicals. But the qualification required that she had to have those competencies.

Similarly, the current package was seen as disadvantaging agricultural workers who were not owner–operators, an increasingly large sector of the potential client group:

There's a number of examples about employees, not so much at the lower levels, but at the higher levels, because if you're saying, you know, one of the competencies required ... succession planning, you know, members of your family, where you're not concerned about that if you're an employee, right? There's a range of those kinds of things. So there's, yeah, there's been some difficulties with it, yeah. (Provider, agriculture)

These identified biases were attributed to the dominance of one stakeholder group in devising the training package:

... but certainly if you really get behind some of those thoughts, the way some of it's structured, it's certainly biased towards the group that were most instrumental [in devising it in the first place]. (Provider, agriculture)

One of the problems facing rural communities is that, although the potential student group is likely to have needs as divergent as any in the city, economies of scale presently mean that the dominant

group is catered for and other groups are expected to fit in. An employment placement officer pointed out that packages and providers often did not take account of the regulations governing financial support for students who are out of the workforce. A particular concern was with Certificate III in Aged Care, a qualification many unemployed people are encouraged to undertake because of an identified need in the industry. The placement officer pointed out that certificate III was the minimum qualification in aged care and unemployed students could not expect employment in the industry with anything less. What these students needed, he claimed, was certificate III packaged as a learning pathway and delivered in such a way that students, who would relinquish other benefits to undertake study, could qualify for Austudy. Instead, in his community at least, the certificate was offered in a series of modules designed to cater for people already working in the industry and wishing to study on a part-time basis. It was not possible for students to study for sufficient hours to qualify for financial support as a full-time student.

Employment officers also drew attention to the impact of flexible delivery of courses on their clients. While this form of delivery was seen to suit employed students, it was seen to be unsuitable for many of their clients because it required access to computers, a high level of literacy (and sometimes numeracy) and a high level of support from family, friends or work mates. For many of their clients, who had left school at an early age because they were unhappy and/or unsuccessful, and before they developed a personal support network for study, this delivery option was seen as unfortunate at best, and cruel at worst. They saw it as reinforcing feelings of failure and providing no realistic chance of employment. Paradoxically, providers' attempts to customise delivery to suit current students may disenfranchise this category of potential students:

We used to have them [face-to-face classes] but the demand dropped down and we surveyed the students and they prefer to have it done by open learning. So therefore we expanded throughout the state. (Provider, aged care)

Other groups of students were also invisible in mainstream provision where treating students equally was interpreted as treating them as if they were the same:

Well we have—I know that we would have some Indigenous workers, but they are treated no differently from any of the other students. We would also have students from non-English speaking backgrounds. We have many Asian students. But again, unless they identify that they actually have a problem then they are treated no differently from somebody else—another student. (Provider, aged care)

The most systematic exception to this general rule was Indigenous students involved in the cultural guiding stream of the tourism package. Here the 'default' student was the Indigenous student and provision was organised around culturally coherent content and delivery.

Indigenous students not involved in Indigenous programs were unlikely to fare well. Employment officers expressed the view that some industries (like retail and hospitality) would be very hard for an Indigenous person to break in to.

We were unable to interview any seasonal workers formally, although we made significant efforts to do so. We did, however, ask phase two respondents to comment on the extent to which they saw the needs of seasonal workers being catered for. The overall picture for the training of seasonal workers appears grim. To begin with, seasonal workers are not clearly visible to providers. In one case study, a provider commented that: 'there's virtually no seasonal work here', while an employment officer stated that: 'all our work's seasonal, it's all seasonal here'. A number of employment officers and providers commented that, in agriculture at least, training was largely irrelevant:

From the employer's point of view and it's interesting you have some farmers say 'it takes me two years to train a graduate when they start working on my farm or it takes me 24 months to train them if they haven't got a graduate certificate'. (Provider, agriculture)

Open or flexible learning was seen as the only really viable option, and that was likely to present difficulties for seasonal workers:

Seasonal workers, like many casuals are disadvantaged in all sorts of ways in that they are not located in any one place, it's hard to keep records, that sort of stuff ... Probably a reasonable option, open learning, despite what people say, assumes that you are reasonably literate, much better self-motivated than the rest of the population and can keep a track of the records ... so open learning in my opinion tends to—and it does make it available for people who are on the move and that sort of stuff, but if I could stereotype, many seasonal workers are not highly motivated, not all that literate, not compared to the average and may suffer from self-discipline problems so. (Provider, agriculture)

Where traineeships were available in agriculture, they were generally confined to members of farmers' families or close friends. Without a personal network, it seemed unlikely that training could be made available.

Area consultative committees

The aim in interviewing representatives of area consultative committees was to get an overview of the communities we studied, the problems they faced and the developmental directions they might expect to take over the next five to ten years. It was important to determine whether training featured as part of development plans and if the potentially broader perspective of area committees might provide different insights into the needs of the community. Area consultative committees do not now have any responsibility for training in their regions.

Area consultative committee representatives needed ways to integrate training packages into regional development plans. They wanted training packages to address the immediate needs of local employers but also to develop a workforce which would meet the needs of global markets now and in the future. In general they believed training packages could perform this role but only where staff were employed to establish and maintain the personal connections within the communities which would make ongoing negotiations possible, and where funding regimes made it possible for providers to deliver programs to relatively small groups of students (like remote students and seasonal workers) with special requirements.

They identified a number of challenges in facilitating appropriate training agendas. First was to convince employers that training is relevant to the success of their enterprises. In cases where 80% of the workers are seasonal, and return year after year to the farm, 'they never saw that it was worth training them'. They saw their role as about 'getting that training culture into the industry'. Many area consultative committee representatives reported that employers were unhappy with the training offered in the regions. This may be because the content of the packages was judged irrelevant to the immediate demands of the enterprise:

We found that the industry sector was not happy with the training packages and that the seasonal workers do not have access to training and we are starting to work with them to look at ways in which they can do some in-house training, with not only their existing staff but then those existing staff being trained up ... workplace trainer and assessor so that they can the train their seasonal workers.

In one case the area consultative committee representative reported that employers were dismissive of the training offered in the region because it was too generic: 'They are saying there is no package', and were trying to source employees trained in the specifics of farming and horticulture as it was practised in the region from elsewhere in Australia. Another noted that when employers did develop programs for local needs they were not supported:

There is a level of cynicism that develops about why developing something at a local level that is much more usable can't then be funded by government.

Others expressed concern because access to training was concentrated in the main regional centres and employees located in more remote areas had to travel very long distances at inconvenient times. Sometimes, too, training in areas of growth simply wasn't available locally:

We have a strong focus in the area on tourism and as far as I know there is no training out there for tourism at all. They will probably end up calling the skills base from somewhere else.

Many area consultative committee representatives were concerned that funding models and regimes constrained providers in what they could offer:

The frustration I think for providers and students is that the funding models across the state and probably the nation are not consistent and I think there is a real danger of under-resourcing in some communities.

Generally speaking, however, area consultative committee representatives were aware that, although training had to meet the immediate needs of employers or a training culture would never develop, too intense a focus on customising training to meet the needs of individual employers may be short-sighted. They were conscious that local regional communities were increasingly sustained by remote, and often international, markets and that these markets had specific demands:

But there also needs to be customising to be able to conform to international standards, particularly where the market is not local. There are specific ... requirements of the customers of products from the industries that will require a certain level of expertise beyond what I would call basic or generic expertise.

The challenge for training in the regions, as the area consultative committees reported it, was to find a way to balance the immediate felt needs of industry (which may be suspicious of training in general in any case) with the sophisticated and specific requirements of the clients on which the industries, and the regional communities, relied:

So there is always that balance as I see it between customising training and making it appropriate for people, and keeping standards to a level that we can export, so that we can export skills ... So if we are customising our training a lot [we need to] make sure that we keep standards to a level that are acceptable in other places.

Some area consultative committee representatives were also mindful of the need to plan for a future that might be very different from the present:

You just have to be careful you don't train just for the industry that is there and we are not really thinking about the industries that could be here in a few years.

Several area consultative committee representatives went further, arguing that these factors meant that all employees needed macro-cognitive skills above any others:

I think the trouble with skills is that they have been workplace specific and very narrow. And people haven't been taught the skills to get skills.

I think as a region we need more of the problem-solving [skills].

I guess it is more a skill of learning to look beyond what is here.

Where area consultative committee representatives felt they were developing (or could develop) programs which had the potential to balance these needs effectively, they stressed the importance of sustained face-to-face communication and a commitment to collaboration across all sectors in a region—employers, employees, schools and providers and government funding agencies. One area consultative committee representative reported a promising collaborative initiative involving seasonal agricultural workers which had begun because an area consultative committee worker had door-knocked all the farms in the regions and reported:

Hang on a minute, they are all employing these massive numbers of people but there is no one that has got any qualifications.

What followed was a lengthy negotiation process in which each of the stakeholders was wooed and a collaborative bid for funded training was made. The area consultative committee representative is optimistic that:

It's not going to be a one-off, it is actually the whole industry moving forward together.

Nevertheless, the committee is concerned that, since it cannot concentrate on one industry sector for much longer, and ongoing funding is not guaranteed, the group may not be self-sustaining. Other area consultative committee representatives confirmed the need for staff charged with the responsibility of facilitating collaboration:

And there is so much potential for employers to become involved, but it takes resources and face-to-face work.

Providers

Do stakeholders' needs vary?

We interviewed a range of different providers for the study. Some were teachers or managers in TAFE institutes (both local to the community and remote from the community to which they were delivering training) delivering a wide range of packages to a wide range of communities. Others were private providers (both local and remote) who tended to identify 'niche markets' (for instance, the Agriculture Training Package, or business and marketing units across a number of packages) often working in cooperation with local TAFE institutes. Several of these providers also acted as consultants in the industries to which they delivered training.

Providers operating in local and rural communities were unanimous that what they needed was a funding regime that made it possible to cater for the disparate needs of clients (employers and students).

Are their needs being met?

Generally speaking, providers argued that current funding regimes work against adequate provision for rural and remote students. One agriculture provider, for instance, is aware that seasonal workers make up a large percentage of the agricultural workers in his region, and that they are rarely trained, but the funding regulations under which he operates make delivering the training unattractive.

But from a management perspective again, I mean, seasonal workers are a pain in the ****. I mean if you try to manage a team of people like I am and you've got targets to meet and that sort of stuff ... I want lecturers to have 20 plus people in front of them. (Provider, agriculture)

A number of providers commented that they were working with, or had considered, flexible delivery. While several were happy with the results, several expressed concern that funding was not adequate:

Open learning is very expensive in terms of labour and very low return, I found.
(Provider, agriculture)

Others were concerned that appropriate resources were not available:

One of the other issues that is a frustration from a teacher point of view is a lot of people are interested in more flexible delivery and we are trying to offer that. However, the resources that are available for flexible delivery are either non-existent or of not acceptable quality.

This meant that restricted access to flexible delivery (sometimes the only form of delivery available) to current students:

So we can offer some units flexibly, but we can't offer a complete qualification that way. And also there is the issue of needing the workplace experience and assessments at the same time. So we are restricting our flexible delivery to people who are existing workers in most cases.
(Provider, aged care)

In many rural communities this kind of restriction would mean that unemployed people could not get training in the full (minimum qualification) Certificate III in Aged Care and so could not gain employment in an industry in need of trained workers.

It was not, however, just the quality of flexible delivery resources that troubled providers, they were also concerned that flexible delivery may not be appropriate for many of their students:

Although another comment that I could make here is that most of the people who we train at certificate III are not confident or well enough equipped to do it online. (Provider, aged care)

They are also concerned with the unreasonable workload that inappropriate resources and inappropriate modes of delivery, create:

And I guess the other thing that I am thinking of from the teacher's perspective is the increased workload that that creates.
(Provider, agriculture)

Some providers were unhappy with the content of the training packages. Several aged care providers were concerned that:

Basic amenity and physiology are not covered. People are saying they are foundation—they are necessary building blocks for the other types of information that people require in aged care or to deliver adequate skills in that area. But they are not covered in the training packages. (Provider, aged care)

They were also sceptical about the way the training packages were developed and, in particular, were concerned that people ‘on the ground’ had not been consulted in the development, and that this compromised them as trainers:

Two years ago I think it is now, industry had no idea at all and I was going to some meetings where there were some very high profile people in the industry but there was nobody at the coal face. And we actually ran a meeting and a lot of those people that were coal face people had no idea about the training package. They had no idea how it works. And we asked them at this meeting and we would have probably had representations from 15 or 20 people in the local area and none of them had been consulted at all about the training packages. So it seemed to be that there were these people in offices that believed that they knew what we would like for the industry but had not even consulted the industry. (Provider, aged care)

Some aged care providers also expressed concern with the procedures for linking industry with training:

The role of the ITAB [industry training advisory body] ought to have been crucial in coordinating industry input and giving it relevance and clout. But we had very mixed experiences with different ITABs. The occasional ITAB chairperson or operator was on the ball and seemed to know what the score was, but others seemed detached and unfamiliar with the direct links of industry into the content of the national training packages. So we think there is a fairly big gap there somewhere. (Provider, aged care)

Research question 2: How and to what extent are training packages customised at local sites to meet the demands of stakeholders?

This research question was framed to examine the following issues: what do providers understand by customisation and contextualisation; what factors impact on the ability of providers to deliver training that reflects the needs of groups in regional and local communities; and do respondents believe there are specific skills that are particularly important in the regional areas in the study.

- ❖ Providers spoke about customising in terms of meeting industry needs, but were often unclear as to what constituted ‘industry’. Industry was variously referred to as specific enterprises, industry sectors and industry bodies.
- ❖ Providers generally did not discuss students as stakeholders unless specifically prompted.
- ❖ Providers customised training to meet employer needs, particularly in terms of time and place of delivery, content, and packaging of qualifications. Some providers however, expressed concern that they could not meet the necessary requirements to award a qualification and at the same time configure units of competency to meet employer demands.
- ❖ Providers were acutely conscious of the need to maintain the credibility and integrity of the qualification while still meeting specific employer needs.
- ❖ Employers were in agreement that successful training depended on providers customising training to reflect practices at the enterprise level.
- ❖ Employers were generally happy with the level to which providers customised the training to meet their needs.

- ✧ Students were positive about the way that training providers addressed their needs, both in terms of addressing individual needs and in making the training relevant.
- ✧ The following factors impacted on successful customisation of training: methods used to identify training needs; methods used to negotiate training; time of training; place of training; content; conceptualisation of skill; designing assessment; and funding.

What did respondents understand by the terms?

Providers were asked specific questions relating both to their understanding of the terms and for specific examples in practice.

Employers were asked about the input they had into the selection of units of competence and whether they believed the training had been customised to meet the needs of both the enterprise and the participants.

Students and ex-students were asked whether the course met the needs of individual learners, whether there were specific issues affecting their local area that needed to be addressed and whether the training was linked to local work opportunities.

While there was significant variation between categories of providers, there was consistency of agreement between respondents in each category.

Providers

Providers raised a range of concerns when talking about customising. Customising was seen to be the process of selecting and adjusting the units of competence to meet enterprise needs. However, this process was not seen as being without problems. Teachers/trainers spoke about the inherent tension between the need for localised content and the potential effect of this on transferability. According to a number of respondents, regional areas also face problems in terms of accessing teachers/trainers who understand how to customise and are able to develop the content and resources to support this.

Most providers spoke about customisation in terms of adjusting the training content to reflect specific workplace content.

To me customisation is more pulling together a qualification or a group of training packages to suit a particular need, whether it be regional or industry sector. And to me contextualisation is probably making the package suit a particular industry sector. I hadn't thought of it to do with the learner before and I don't know if other people [have]. I have only heard it spoken about in relation to industry sectors rather than the learner. (Aged care)

As far as customisation is concerned, I think a bit of common sense. You have got to make the thing fit what the industry needs in the local area and that is why we have got good outcomes, and that is why we have got people moving on, because we constantly keep in touch with what is happening in the industry and certainly what their needs are, and we adjust as we go. Without the feedback from the employers we certainly wouldn't be able to keep up with them. (Agriculture)

Customisation, to most providers, meant adjusting training purely in terms of meeting industry needs with little recognition of the needs of the learner. A few teachers/trainers such as the following aged care provider, did discuss the pedagogical implications of meeting client needs from the perspective of the learner:

To me customising is just adapting something to meet a specific need ... we are very aware of the problems within [our region] ... As far as the jobs and the low socio-economic background. I do a lot more one-on-one work with people. I do a lot more activity-based things to take into account the low educational background. I give them a lot of anecdotal stuff from my own experiences and try to keep it as less like a classroom as I can.

One of the issues consistently raised was the need to address the balance between customising of training and maintaining of the integrity of the national qualification.

I have worked down at the mill on their training packages and they have to be contextualised for their enterprise agreement and all sorts of things, and that is one of the benefits that they got, they got right into training packages down there ... However, you shouldn't compromise the national accreditation system in doing that. (Area consultative committee)

When discussing this tension between the local and the national, teachers/trainers often mentioned that one of the critical issues related to this dilemma was the lack of resources available that they could call on. Some providers also saw the problem being exacerbated by the difficulty of attracting and keeping qualified and experienced staff.

Some providers spoke of the difficulties in maintaining standards and therefore the integrity of the qualification when the standards themselves are variable.

The standards are variable in industry, they are variable within the packages, and that is one disadvantage. The more we can customise ... the more we are going to move away from a recognised standard within the industry. Chainsaws. We have what we consider the industry standard for assessing chainsaws which would be to use a minimum size saw, and you do x amounts of cuts. And this is a level 2 competency, but female students for example, we allow the assessment to take place using a smaller saw than the standard. And what we do is we make a special note on the student's file. (Agriculture)

Employers

Employers were asked to what extent they felt that the training package was customised to meet both the needs of the enterprise and the students. Most of the respondents clearly indicated that the strength of the training was dependent on its reflecting their specific environment and felt that the providers worked with them to meet their needs.

It was very well customised, so it worked well. We could sort of review that and really work very closely with the trainer that we had in here to get what we wanted out of it. And used our existing infrastructure like the systems that were used in the office, used those to actually produce the information that we needed. Say for assignments and assessments and things like that, we were actually able to use our computers in the way that we use them to produce the results, which was great. (Tourism)

Another employer commented on the importance of ongoing contact with the provider to ensure that the training is appropriately customised.

[The provider] has certainly said to us, you know, are we suiting needs and I didn't get to that first meeting, but other DONs [directors of nursing] here suggested that they needed more practical training, more actual time on prac, so [the provider] has increased that. (Aged care)

This clear statement about what works best at a grass-roots level is borne out by the research which has been conducted into workplace learning. Billett (1994), Lave (1993) and Wenger (1999) among others state that learning is most effective when it is experiential and situated in a relevant context. One of the advantages of situating learning on site, is that it offers the opportunity to see learning as a social activity and to draw on the shared experience of the group.

Knowledge ... exists in a workplace as long as the group that is constructing it is present and interacting. This is because the knowledge is constituted from the interacting contributions of all workers who are operating in a particular work activity. (Gerber 2000, p.92)

The advantages of this utilisation of local knowledge can be seen from the perspective of this next employer. Although he indicated that the training was not really customised, the way in which they drew on their in-house knowledge indicated that training outcomes still met their needs.

So it is very hard to adapt, to have a general training program that fits everyone in this particular industry—it can be very difficult, it is so diverse. But I think the basics of it work fairly well and what they don't get from that they learn from us on the job.

Interestingly, a number of providers strongly believed that employers did not have much input because they did not understand the complexity of training packages.

Most people in industry, in my opinion, don't give a stuff about training anyway, many of them. And they certainly don't give a hoot about a training package and most of them can't even—I mean when you hand them the Seafood Package [it] is a about a foot thick, so when you hand it to the person and say, here what do you think of that? What do you think, you're a busy person running a farm, what are you going to do with the thing? (Agriculture)

Current and ex-students

Of the 12 current and ex-students interviewed, all but one were very positive about the way that their teacher/trainer had contextualised the training. They were asked to comment on the relevance of the training to their jobs (if they were currently employed) and all felt that the training was very relevant. It should be noted that the aged care and tourism courses were all off-campus and students were either employees or planning on setting up their own businesses. The agriculture courses were campus-based although some students were self-employed on their own farms while other students gained experience through working on a provider-owned farm.

Students were also asked whether there were any issues specific to their region that they felt should be addressed and, if so, did they believe they had been addressed. Eight of the 12 felt that there were not any specific issues, and of the four who said there were, all felt that these had been appropriately dealt with.

I am originally from South Australia and when they do cattle work it is all to do with motor bikes when up here in the Northern Territory it is more to do with horses and I just wanted to get a few more qualifications with cattle and horses. (Agriculture)

When students were asked whether the teacher/trainer had offered support to students with specific needs, the answer was unequivocally yes, although none of the students interviewed felt that they personally required any additional support.

The final question related to whether links were made between the training and local work opportunities. Two of the students were self-employed so they felt that the question was not relevant but the other student responses were very positive.

One student commented:

He [the trainer] comes here every fortnight and we make a plan, like where's our next destination, and then we plan two weeks ahead. Like for this trip now that we made into [the city], it was a two weeks plan ahead. So it was all organised by the students where we are going to go next, what we are going to see and everything. (Tourism)

Another student said:

We just when we were doing like say assignments and things like that we had to base it on like somebody who was already operating here in [our area]. (Tourism)

Factors that impact on training

Methods of identifying training needs

Respondents identified three key methods through which training needs were identified. The first of these is through the area consultative committees. In regional areas these committees have been key players in identifying training needs. When first established, their role was to advise the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs on regional employment issues and on ways to improve job and training opportunities.

As part of this role in identifying new employment opportunities, a number of area consultative committees identified the training that would need to be provided to ensure that there was a trained workforce able to grow these new economic opportunities.

... through our skills audit what we hoped to achieve there was to identify the skills that were going to be needed in the future in the region and that information was given to training

providers so that they could then look at how they could set themselves up in a position to be able to deliver that kind of training down the track.

Over the past few years we have actually had involvement in a range of different projects that we have funded through the regional assistance program predominantly, which have looked at skills shortages, skills audits, training and skills development, so that has been a primary focus of ACCs in recent years.

However, as the area consultative committees now report to the Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services, their charter has been amended and it appears that their function in relation to training has been limited.

... so we have moved to a more regional development kind of focus. So we have moved away a little bit from that sort of employment training focus that we had in the past few years. So that is not something that we will necessarily know or get involved in now I'm afraid.

The second method identified by respondents was through the use of brokers. In one of the regions, the area consultative committee had identified a need for people with skills in tourism and hospitality so that the region could capitalise on potential tourist activities. They approached the industry training advisory board and spoke about their needs. The industry training advisory board put them in contact with a number of possible providers. The decision was made not to use the local provider but to use a metropolitan provider who listened to what they wanted to achieve and designed a program around their expressed needs. In this instance, the broker, having contact with providers, could identify those providers whom they thought could best respond to the needs articulated by the area consultative committee.

A third means of identifying training needs results from the economic imperative of having to meet local and international quality standards. In order to access some domestic markets and overseas markets, employers, particularly in the food producing and manufacturing areas, need to implement specific quality assurance (QA) systems such as Euroland. Training is often required for management and workers to be able to comply with these requirements. Industry peak bodies which work to improve access to new markets are in a position to use these quality assurance demands as predictors of additional training needs and to work with providers to set up relevant training:

... there also needs to be customising to be able to conform to international standards, particularly where our market is not local, there are specific, I suppose, requirements of the products from the industries that will require a certain level of expertise beyond what I would call the basic or generic expertise.

One of the problems that was raised in relation to the identification of training needs was the need for providers to be proactive in identifying and responding to identified future skills shortages. For example, one of the area consultative committees identified aquaculture as a potential growth area for their region. The spokesperson commented that, as a result of the present funding system, the local TAFE institutes could not be proactive in establishing training but reactive only in that they could respond to state-identified key priority areas. Yet, this issue of proactivity appears to be a critical factor in how well the VET system is perceived to be responding to client needs.

Methods of negotiating training

Results from this study support the findings from other studies (Falk et al. 2001; *Djama and VET* 1998) that it is critically important for a process of collaboration to be implemented to ensure that the needs of stakeholders are addressed.

VET is useful when it results from the needs of individuals and groups achieved through the commitment of people who plan and develop the design of VET collaboratively and inclusively across groups and sectors of the community. (Falk et al. 2001, introduction)

While this holds true for all learning environments, including schools, universities, community centres and workplaces, it takes on even more import when establishing training within

communities where there is not necessarily a shared understanding of 'European' approaches to education and learning.

Our research indicated that the most successful model in these situations involved the use of a broker who already had credibility within the community. The broker participated in initial discussions, then brought in the outsider whose initial credibility was determined through association with the broker. Of course, ongoing credibility would only be maintained by the teacher/trainer's ability to engage with that community.

[The Aboriginal Development Officer] works fairly closely with the Aboriginal communities to look at what economic development opportunities are there, then we work closely with him and also Aboriginal Elders on the communities to discuss what their projects are going to be and what level we set the certificate at, and also which units of competence we should include in the certificate that would be relevant to the community leaders ... I guess basically we take the clients, the people that are going to be our students, and we discuss with them what their needs are, and from there we build the package around that.

When talking to providers, it became clear that a critical factor in establishing and maintaining partnerships was the relationship between the individual teacher/trainer and the community. Potentially therefore, there is a fragile and tenuous thread that could unravel when that individual is no longer involved in the program.

Partnerships that are based on inclusivity, consultation, negotiation and responsiveness do not yet have an enduring character within the system. These partnerships, when they are established, exist briefly through the efforts of committed individuals and clients and not through the efforts of VET and adult education [and] have tended to be the province of institutional mavericks. *(Djama and VET 1998, p.38)*

We found only one case in which this had been recognised and a process for succession planning thought through. In some communities a level of cynicism has developed about the lack of ongoing commitment, resulting in a reluctance to participate in training opportunities.

Almost all providers identified the need to have a collaborative process, involving stakeholders, particularly employers, in the design of training. There were however, a number of comments indicating that, in many cases, employers did not want to be involved, believing that the training provider had the expertise to know what was required.

Initially what we did was have a working party that had people working in the industry, people who were delivering the course, and people who had delivered previous aged care training, look at the unit, match those units to the competencies that we felt workers in aged care facilities needed and then chose the units that we felt linked closest to the tasks that they would be carrying out ... Industry, to be honest, aren't that interested. They see it as our role rather than theirs ... You have to devote a lot of time getting to know the training package before you can really make comment on the content of it and how relevant it is. There aren't many people in the industry who are prepared or able to do that. *(Aged care)*

Virtually no providers mentioned the need to involve students, other than Indigenous students, in negotiating the design or implementation of the training.

Time

There were a number of issues in relation to time identified by providers. Providers spoke about the length of time needed to establish appropriate training in local communities. It takes time to gather the necessary background information from a broad range of stakeholders not only about what training is needed, but to develop an understanding of all the factors that impact on the design and delivery of relevant training.

In all the regions where we deliver training we have a very close association with the regional development boards, business enterprise centres and so on. And thus when we put together a program, or look at it, it is through discussions with them over a long period of time.

(Provider, agriculture)

Secondly, there is the issue of timing in relation to the actual delivery. This could mean designing training that reflects climatic conditions such as wet and dry seasons and the impact of this on accessibility to training. It also means taking into account cultural issues in relation to timing that will impact on the conduct of the actual training. This is particularly so in Indigenous communities where community responsibilities may need to be given precedence over planned training activities.

It is one thing to change the package around to make it fit the needs of the clients, it is another to have the resources and the time allowed to deliver the program in a way that is going to have real outcomes for the clients. (Provider, tourism)

The time required to develop or contextualise resources was another factor mentioned by a number of providers. A tourism provider noted that:

... it is a difficult thing to do if we have to produce the documents or produce the manuals and that is a lot of time to us ... it does take a lot of time to have a good standard.

Place

Regional communities vary in their size, degree of isolation and access to mainstream training. Economic opportunities may be limited and access to education and training similarly limited. Where students will access the training will have implications for both customising and contextualising.

... one of the problems is that some of the areas we are in are quite geographically small and so there are small numbers of people undertaking training. And of course with TAFE ... they have got their critical numbers issue. So if the numbers are small then the training is not provided. (Area consultative committee)

Some regional centres may be too small to be able to offer training that has been identified as important by employers or regional authorities. In one region, for example, a respondent from the New Apprenticeship centre commented that young people may be expected to travel to the capital city to attend training because it was not economically viable for a provider to offer training in courses where there are fewer than ten participants. She gave the example of an employer who ran a caravan park and wanted to employ a trainee but the local provider would not agree to take on the trainee saying it was not economically feasible for them to do so.

Potential students may not be able, or want to, travel to attend training, but for the provider to meet their needs can prove to be a costly exercise. We found one instance where the local TAFE institute designed a tourism training program that did address the issue of distance. Participants in the program came from remote communities, which meant that the distances and associated costs for participants to travel to the regional centre were prohibitive. The teacher therefore spends considerable time travelling to the communities to work with participants on their home turf. In addition, participants are brought to the regional centre for blocks of training two or three times during the course. This allows them to cover the more theoretical components of the course, to work as a group and to engage in activities as tourists themselves so that can have a greater understanding of what it means to be a tourist.

Another provider delivering agricultural training has also moved away from the traditional classroom-based model to meet the needs of participants.

So our training programs are designed to meet the needs of our clients and we would not be successful if we told some of these agriculture people that they had to sit in a classroom for three days a week for 40 weeks of the year to complete this course. So what we have done is adapted our material so that we deliver the principles and the core information in workshop situations, and then provide the students with assessments and assignments that they complete at home. (Agriculture)

In cases where students needed to travel to attend training in regional centres or capital cities, one of the challenges for teachers/trainers was to maintain the relevance for regional students. One of the more productive ways in which providers dealt with the need to embed and situate learning

was to encourage students to talk about the specifics of their own work sites and then as a group, compare and discuss the differences.

[You need to] give them the opportunity to be very participative in the process. I also think there is a recognition, that it needs to be stated to them outright, that the skills, the course skills can be implemented in a number of different ways effectively, depending on the environment and the situation. (Provider, agriculture)

One of the area consultative committees when talking about the problems faced by businesses in regional communities mentioned the specific difficulties faced by small business. She noted that because of their size, it is not financially viable for a provider to deliver training on site, yet because of their geographical isolation, it is not possible for providers to set up cluster training or for the business to release employees to attend on-campus training. In any case, on-campus training may not be the preferred option, as small business, like other enterprises, want training that has been customised to reflect their specific work practices. This view was also noted in a report, *Skilling East Gippsland*, in which the authors commented:

From a provider perspective, servicing small business can be difficult given their size, geographical location and the capacity to pay for services. This has contributed to a perception on the part of some small businesses that providers do not understand their needs. (Bodi, Gray & Magg 2000, p.28)

Content

Commitment to training is more likely if there is ownership of the training itself. Designing the training program needs to take into account a range of issues, including what units of competence are to be selected and what content the curriculum will need to contain.

A curriculum is a local negotiation. The need for locale to influence curriculum must be respected, resourced and worked at. (Djarma & VET 1998, p.72)

In order to establish how, and to what extent, stakeholders were actually involved in determining the content of training, respondents were asked how the processes of customising and contextualising worked for them.

Employers were asked about their input into the content of the training and whether they specified the competencies they wanted included. Responses to this question were mixed.

We accepted the advice of the training advisor, and we sat down with the two trainees and the training advisor and assessed, calculated what modules they should cover, to cover the experience we wanted them get, and the end result they wanted to achieve. (Tourism)

The staff members themselves, they pick what they want to take, what they are interested in. Because there is nothing that is offered that is not relevant. So what I try to do is encourage them to take different subjects so that we cover all the subjects for their electives. But obviously I encourage them to do what they are interested in and that is completely up to them, that is their choice. (Aged care)

Providers were asked how they designed their training programs and to what extent their programs took into account regional and site-specific needs. Nearly all providers spoke about the need to at least meet with employers when setting up a training program, but a number of them commented that the employers were not really interested in getting to the level of discussing content:

They leave it up to us to make sure that what we're delivering is the latest and it's up to speed with the rest of the nation to a certain extent and they trust us to do that, I guess. (Agriculture)

One of the issues raised by some providers was that it was not actually the qualification that employers were after, but a course customised to meet their needs.

They tell us what they want us to do and we go back and we try and make that fit the training package. So it may be that it's not an award, it's bits and pieces out of a whole host of units that makes up what the client wants ... we as the educators would be suicidal if we

chose to say to the end user, well, no we can't do a course like that, we've actually got to do it this way. We'd be out of business in two days flat.

Falk et al. similarly found that:

Pressure to abandon courses customised for local markets and adopt national training packages has led to some concerns from training providers, across the sites, regarding the quality of learning. (Falk et al. 2001, p.140)

In itself this is not necessarily a problem, unless the students, who in this scenario are likely to be employees, feel that they are disadvantaged by not being able to achieve a formally recognised qualification.

As this study has indicated, there is a range of stakeholders who have a real and legitimate interest in what and how training is offered in regional communities. Clearly, employers and students are key groups, but there are others with legitimate claims to be involved, such as area consultative committees. Involving a range of stakeholders means that providers need to know and understand the broader local and contextual factors that will impact on the design and provision of training.

... of course the skills need to be addressed along the way, but that is part of having providers that are in tune with what their people want and have the confidence of their constituency. (Area consultative committee)

One of these broader contextual factors is the economic make-up of the region. One of the respondents noted that different industries are at different stages of development in different regions, and that unless a provider has a clear understanding of the particular region, the training being delivered could be inappropriate.

I think we need to be fairly flexible to not deliver training packages which are for what I would call a mature industry when the industry is only in a growth phase. We need to be able to adapt to meet where the industry is at any given point in time. So I think that type of customisation is very important and does happen quite significantly throughout this region here. (Area consultative committee)

Conceptualisation of skill

Employers and providers spoke at length about generic and specific skills, and although there was a general feeling that generic skills equated to 'soft skills', there were conflicting views about what constituted these skills. One group of respondents identified generic skills as consisting of skills such as communication, occupational health and safety, and office management. Another group saw generic skills as employability skills, including attitudes and work readiness. A third group spoke of generic skills in terms of the generic template inherent in a training package.

When respondents spoke about specific skills, they unanimously saw these as referring to technical, job or site-specific skills.

... if you are talking about young people, employers want them to be trained in the specific job they are doing. But they also want them to have other skills ... They want them to be able to read, write, have occupational health and safety, first aid all that stuff ... I mean it's all those things you learn when you go and study that aren't necessarily examinable that are worthwhile. (Area consultative committee)

Not many respondents spoke about the need to ground the acquisition of generic skills in any context. However, all respondents, when discussing specific skills, saw these as site-specific and grounded in context. Yet practitioners, such as communication teachers, teaching skills that have traditionally been regarded as non-occupational skills, have long understood that effective teaching and learning needs to relate learning to the students' experience and embed it within a meaningful context.

Schon discovered that when accomplishing their work, workers do not select a set of appropriate means in relation to an objective and given work, which is separate from their experience ... As workers frame their work, the attributes used in performing it are not separate from their experience of it. Instead, workers attributes are internally related to work through their ways of framing specific work situations. (Sandberg cited in Gerber 2000, p.52)

Although individual learners will have preferred ways of learning, the construction of learning as a situated, shared and experiential activity supports our view that a reconceptualisation of generic and specific skills may be what is needed. This reconceptualisation would then construe any skill that is not embedded in context as generic, but when situated, it then becomes specific. This would hold true for 'soft skills' such as collaborating with peers, as well as technical skills such as pruning fruit trees. The distinction between generic and specific then becomes replaced by the idea of the interconnectedness of skill as shaped by the work environment. A provider described it thus:

So what industry is telling us is it's not smart to have a generic qualification that says I can manage aquaculture or a farming enterprise but if you ask me is that a wheat or a barley crop, I couldn't tell you. Industry is saying we want the management knowledge, but it has to come with an understanding of the grass roots of the industry. How else can the person make the best decision for the enterprise without that grass-roots knowledge? (Agriculture)

In the report *Employability skills for the future* (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002), the authors also propose a shifting from the use of the terms 'generic' and 'specific'. They suggest using the terms 'personal attributes' and 'skills'. The term 'personal attributes' is:

Used to describe a set of non skill-based behaviours and attitudes that employers felt were as important as the employability skills and other technical or job-specific skills. The term skills is used to describe the learned capacity of the individual.

(Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002, p.5)

Each skill consists of a number of elements and each enterprise will determine what mix of skills and associated elements is appropriate for that site and for individual jobs within that enterprise. The recognition that industry must not only live with continuous change but anticipate and engage with change, has led to a shift towards a stronger focus on the need for broad skills, such as problem-solving, team work and self-management which are then applied to work within a specific site. In our study, some people also identified this need for a rethinking of the importance placed on enterprise specific, technical skills.

... from my experience, the training packages when they first came, it was sort of very much specific skills and didn't tend to teach people to think and question and research and way up pros and cons and things like that. And then it depends on the culture of the place, whether they value their workforce being able to problem-solve and think for themselves, or just do the job they are told to do sort of thing ... I think as a region we need more of the problem-solving. There are a lot of people here with specific skills and ... jobs come and go now. And the specific skills don't necessarily do them any good in the end.

(Area consultative committee)

A critical issue for providers becomes, as some respondents noted, one of helping students learn how to transfer their skills into new situations. As one provider noted when talking about the ability to attend to the same issues in different contexts:

... you actually have to attend to these issues in a context even if you've learnt the industry-specific units of competency, because each workplace changes within an individual industry. (Agriculture)

In regional areas where employment opportunities may be limited and where the focus is on finding new directions as traditional industries decline, the need to encourage all stakeholders to develop this broader view of skills acquisition becomes even more critical.

Assessment

Just as the design and delivery of course content needs to be customised and contextualised to meet the needs of both the enterprise and the individual participants, so do the assessment strategies adopted. Employers generally felt that one of the ways in which providers customised their training was by designing assessment tasks around site specific work practices.

The students where they have to hand in an assignment, it's already based on the work area, so it is already basically customised. I mean that is how it is customised. (Aged care)

In the few cases where this did not happen, employers felt this undermined the effectiveness of the learning experience. One employer felt very strongly that the training provider imposed assessment tasks that were:

irrelevant and they called on them to do things that they would never ever, that were far beyond the scope of their ability to absorb and they would never be able to utilise the stuff they learnt. The stuff they were supposed to be writing essays on, they would never use that. It was more, it was almost like they were preparing them for further education and not preparing them to be working at a particular level. (Aged care)

One of the providers also noted that a key method used to customise training and assessment was to ask students to relate the learning to their specific worksite:

So they will go into a different workplace, they are being assessed against the same unit, but the different workplaces all have a different range of clients that they are delivering to, they have different processes in place within the workplace, so we have assessment processes that are generic I suppose across a whole group of students, but meet the needs of individual workplaces as well.

A few providers raised the issue of the limited opportunities for practice, including practical demonstration of skill in a small community and the potential impact this has on maintaining the integrity of a national qualification. A provider gave the following example of how she dealt with this. She was teaching Certificate III in Office Administration, which has a whole unit on dealing with mail, including batching and post codes. However, in her small town, there was only one employer large enough to need to batch mail and that was the Post Office. She arranged for the students to go to the Post Office to practise batching mail.

In one sense they were never going to use it, but if they moved beyond [this area] it's possible they could and that's what I think always happens with the training packages. With just about every unit of competence there'll be elements that just don't fit within the organisation.

Funding

Many of the problems associated with the issues identified above are related to funding. Time and time again, respondents articulated their frustration about the difficulties related to accessing or delivering quality VET training due to financial restrictions. There were a number of areas that were consistently nominated by respondents as impacting on delivery. Although some of these frustrations are evident whenever teachers/trainers talk about their work, they are exacerbated in regional communities. Issues included:

- ✧ the cost of developing resources designed to meet the needs of students in their region
- ✧ the additional costs in providing appropriate services to disadvantaged groups, such as seasonal workers
- ✧ the lack of money available to attract qualified and experienced staff to remote and regional areas
- ✧ the difficulties in providing a range of training opportunities when the student numbers are small
- ✧ the costs associated with allowing staff to attend professional development programs when there are the additional costs associated with distance
- ✧ travel costs for staff travelling to worksites as distances in regional areas are often large
- ✧ lack of money to be proactive in developing programs for emerging skill areas where there is not an established student demand
- ✧ the cost of travel for students.

Many of these are the same issues identified by the TAFE Directors, who in 2001, published a position paper, in which they discuss the difficulties faced by TAFE institutes in delivering training packages to regional communities. These include the cost factors in delivering training which may

have been identified as important but which will only attract limited student numbers. There are also the costs associated with travel for teachers/trainers in providing on-the-job assessments. These costs, they argue, have resulted in some institutes reducing the number of competencies they offer in pathways to qualifications as well as the total number of programs on offer (TAFE Directors 2001, p.5).

In our interviews, one respondent quoted a case of a small business wanting to put on a trainee in a travel-related area. However, the local TAFE institute would/could not enrol the trainee as it would be economically unviable unless there was a minimum of eight trainees. The employer provided non-accredited on-the-job training, but clearly this was not the preferred outcome either for the employer or the employee.

Another respondent, this time from an area consultative committee, commented that there was a level of frustration with funding because of the limitations the current model imposed. While the training package guidelines identify the need to customise to meet the needs of local communities, the reality is the money is not available from the funding bodies for this customisation to occur.

There is a level of cynicism that develops about why developing something at a local level that is much more usable can't then be funded by government. (Area consultative committee)

Staffing was nominated by many respondents as a key issue and again this was described in relation to funding. A provider identified a major problem in accessing and keeping qualified staff.

[You need to have] an attractive package under our award conditions, teaching conditions, pay and salaries to make coming to a remote regional location attractive. I have only got 12 staff houses and I have 30 staff. And I can guarantee you, every time I advertise, if I haven't got a house available, I have just wasted \$6000 in advertising and recruitment. (Agriculture)

Seasonal and casual workers constitute a significant percentage of the workforce, particularly in the areas of agriculture and tourism. Although it was not possible in the timeframe of this project to interview seasonal and casual workers themselves, the researchers raised issues related to the training of these groups with both employers and providers. From an employer perspective, the key issues raised were the cost of training people, given that they will leave. Thus the employer feels they will not recoup the investment. This is compounded by the fact that many of the people employed in these jobs are backpackers who will not be around for the following season. Seasonal and casual workers are, by definition, employed when there is work. Employers then do not have time to train these workers, but rather require people who already have the skills and are able to commence productive work immediately. Farmers, for example, requiring fruit to be picked, employ people when the fruit is already ready to be picked, just as hospitality and tourist operators employ workers at the beginning of the busy season.

This provider talked about the need to customise training to reach this group and noted that one option was to offer training through open learning. However, as she pointed out, this form of learning:

assumes that you are reasonably literate, much better motivated than the rest of the population and can keep a track of records, and the evidence is that this is not true for many of these workers. There's never enough of them to influence the training, so for us to customise for them, that's why I'm saying I think that are disadvantaged. (Agriculture)

One of her colleagues also noted that from an institute perspective, this form of training was also not realistic.

I want lecturers to have 20 plus people in front of them. Open learning is very expensive in terms of labour and very low return. (Agriculture)

A number of the respondents mentioned that the largely negative attitudes towards the training of seasonals and casuals have also been influenced by what has been seen as irrelevant training. Farmers were saying that what they wanted was training that was delivered on the farm so that employees understood the specifics of that particular site. Teaching on campus was not seen to deliver what was required.

Employers have just been so annoyed with the fact that the people that are coming out of TAFE colleges and so forth, they are just standard courses, they are not meeting their needs, so they are just not employing them and instead they are actually advertising all around Australia and bringing them from other states to come and work for them here which is crazy when there are so many people here unemployed. (Area consultative committee)

Are there specific skills that are particularly important in these regional areas?

While some regions noted that there were skill shortages in specific areas, generally the skill shortages were more a function of regionality than specific locale. Concern was expressed about addressing these skill shortages in ways that were appropriate for the region. These ranged from the need to take into account the specifics of the area as well as encouraging students to develop a breadth of skills to support their own economic survival in regional areas where employment opportunities are often limited.

The majority of respondents commented that living in regional communities meant that it was significantly more difficult to attract people in most skill areas, ranging from professional, such as doctors, through to tradespeople, as well as people with skills to help develop emerging industries.

Like other rural areas there are things like doctors, nurses, medical profession, teachers and what have you, but we also have a great shortage of farmhands, motor mechanics, electricians, accountants, welders ... So our skill shortages are probably similar to others based on the agricultural industry. (Area consultative committee)

In one of the regions in the study, an area consultative committee spokesperson highlighted the need for industry to play a key role in making sure that the training offered reflects the skill needs of the area.

I think [our region] is fairly unique in that industry doesn't hesitate to make a contribution to putting infrastructure in place to make the delivery of training packages a lot easier as well. (Area consultative committee)

It can then become problematic however, if industry has definite needs for their particular region that are not reflected in other regions or centres and are not necessarily able to be dealt with within the guidelines of the training package. This was a concern voiced by the executive officer from an area consultative committee:

I have observed that where training packages haven't fitted or necessarily been relevant to this particular area, they have actually been able to look at adapting say the electrical trades training and building trades training so that it is more relevant to local employers. Now the problem of course with that is that it is then very difficult to have an adapted program seen as something that is accredited and that has been a real struggle as to how far you adapt without undermining the integrity of the training program. Employers say we just don't get people who have got the skills that we require.

One of the regions which has a large Indigenous population noted that, as well as having skill shortages across the board, there were also significant issues of literacy and numeracy that are of primary importance. This, combined with a lack of work and training opportunities, has meant that employers import skilled people rather than employing local people. Employers in this region have also complained that the local population lacks 'general skills to do with work readiness'.

One of the area consultative committee respondents, when talking about specific skills required in her region, also raised the issue of generic skills and work readiness. She discussed this in the context of a region that was undergoing significant change in terms of new industries replacing traditional industries and commented that, traditionally the skills people have been taught:

have been very much workplace-specific and very narrow. And people haven't been taught the skills to get skills. So that is the skill that is most important, you know the skills to deal with change and look a bit broader.

The parameters of this project do not allow for a wide-ranging analysis of generic skills. However, as discussed earlier in the section on the conceptualisation of skill, the debate over what sort of learning and skills development people need to survive in labour markets which are characterised by impermanence and instability needs to be continued.

Research question 3: To what extent are providers packaging competency standards to allow for cross-industry qualifications?

Providers in rural communities face the apparently contradictory demands of, on the one hand, customising and contextualising training packages to suit the highly specific demands of individual workplaces and industry sectors and, on the other hand, training a workforce for an uncertain future where new industries may emerge and old industries fade. They must balance these competing demands while attempting to ensure that their mode of delivery is cost-efficient in communities where discrete student cohorts are likely to be relatively small (and therefore expensive to teach). Packaging competency standards to allow for cross-industry qualifications may seem attractive as far as flexibility of qualification and the pragmatics of delivery go, but difficult to achieve in the face of employers' expressed requirement of highly customised and contextualised training.

This study found that:

- ✧ Providers generally agreed that business administration and management skills could be effectively packaged to allow for significant cross-industry qualifications.
- ✧ Some providers believed that business administration and management skills were most effectively taught in a heterogenous cohort that encouraged students to attend to the general principles of business management and to learn to identify the unique elements of their business environment and why they mattered.
- ✧ Providers differed in their views on whether highly regulated modules (like occupational health and safety) were highly context-specific or easily delivered as cross-industry competencies.
- ✧ Providers were generally of the view that 'customer service' modules of any training package were transferable across packages.
- ✧ Providers generally felt that there was potential for closely allied packages to cross-accredit. Many, but not all, aged care providers, for instance, felt that there was significant cross-accreditation potential with disability studies. Tourism providers generally felt that there was significant cross-accreditation potential with hospitality studies.
- ✧ Where providers supported the idea of cross-accreditation, they generally felt that employees needed some form of systematic support in making the transition from one workplace to another, or one industry to another. For some this was viewed as a student responsibility and could be covered in modules concerned with 'paying attention to context'. For others this was a provider responsibility and could be dealt with by 'topping up' a credit gained in another industry sector. Others argued that employers could provide the best insight into the unique qualities of their workplace.
- ✧ A minority of providers felt that packages were already too generic and that specialist areas were neglected.

Many providers saw a major potential benefit of training packages to be the capacity to cross-credit:

I think the biggest issue is the whole idea of a training package was that there would be transferability. There would be career pathways, study pathways, for students to be able to cross-credit.
(Provider, aged care)

However, cross-accreditation was not a simple matter. It was here that the tension between customisation and flexibility really began to bite. For most providers, the issue was not so much whether cross-accreditation was acceptable in general, but rather and how it might be achieved without compromising the integrity of the training package or the needs of the industry sector. Providers also pointed out, that cross-accreditation seemed to work better for some students than for others.

Almost without exception, providers interviewed for this study argued that the greatest potential for cross-industry packaging lay in the business management and administration modules available in virtually all packages. In their view there was significant overlap in the modules offered, and students would be far better served if these modules were taught as a set of principles pertaining uniquely to individual contexts (that is, not pertaining to industries or industry sectors, but to the specific configuration of factors applying to individual businesses at particular points in time). Some small providers concentrated on offering business and management units across a range of packages and in range of locations (within and between states). Here the provider addressed directly the client's belief that their industry was unique:

I suppose, that one of the approaches that I take in working with small business owners is dispelling the myths and barriers that they create for themselves, either individually or as an industry. You get entire industry sectors who create these falsehoods about the way that practices should be done and you know there's no sort of basis except that that's the way we've done it for 20 years and we're not going to change.

(Provider, management and administration units)

Providers offering agriculture, tourism and aged care packages supported this view with regard to business administration modules.

Other providers, whose scope includes allied packages, also taught combined classes for the relevant parts of the unit:

And the other thing that we are doing, we are combining classes for some parts of some units where the skill set is the same. So we have aged care and disability students in the same classroom. They may be enrolled in a different unit, but the underpinning knowledge and the skills required are the same.

(Provider, aged care)

While providers agreed that some units certainly could be transferred across qualifications, without exception, they argued that students should, nonetheless, be encouraged to pay attention to what was specific about the environment they were working in. Providers had a range of ways of providing that opportunity. Some encouraged students to attend 'not for credit' classes to 'top up' their knowledge.

Although what we do find is that students for instance, who do occupational health and safety in a business program who then come to us to do aged care training find there are some gaps in their knowledge—with the unit they technically gain credit for. We will often slot them into different classes without enrolling them just so they get the information in the context of aged care.

(Provider, aged care)

A popular strategy amongst providers who actively sought to teach across packages was to tie the assessment task directly to the actual or projected workplace context. This was done, not to customise the unit, but to teach students how to pay attention to the specifics of any context while providing them with an immediately useful outcome (like a business plan).

Many providers believed that the potential for cross-crediting modules was significant, that there was currently far too much overlap in the packages, and that useful work could be done in developing more generic units that drew attention to the similarities of contexts across industry sectors as well as to the differences.

In other cases, however, existing cross-crediting arrangements were questioned by providers. An instructive example is communication in the Community Services Training Package. Communication is often cited as a generic skill, and its application across industry sectors regarded as

unproblematic. In this context, however, the provider stressed the critical nature of the contexts of aged care and youth work and argued that training should be context-specific:

That is in conflict with cross-credits. I think one of the original concepts of the national packages was that if you did Communication IIIA in welfare, then if you came into aged care you automatically got that as a cross-credit. But we have decided no, that is not so, because we contextualise ours to meet the aged care industry. Communication IIIA is different in youth work than it is in the aged care industry. (Provider, aged care)

What seems to matter here is the critical importance of communication in these industry sectors, and the amount of time devoted to them in the training package. An extended study of communication could teach students about the ways in which effective communication relies on a sophisticated ability to read context, a more limited study probably has to confine itself to the specifics of one context. In other packages, where communicative demands are generally more routine, and carry less moral weight, the transferability of communication modules may be more acceptable.

While transferability was sometimes seen as diluting training packages, some providers saw carefully targeted cross-accreditation as providing the opportunity to increase the breadth and depth of substantive knowledge in the industry, and sought to package units to encourage this:

But one of the other cross-industry issues that is working in our favour and in the students' and workers' favour in aged care is we are getting quite a few students who will do a combination of aged and disability training. And in fact we are getting a number of workers, and I have got one for you to interview actually, who do one qualification—say the Disability Certificate III—and then they will top up with aged care specialisation or vice versa. (Provider, aged care)

The breadth and depth of knowledge was also a concern expressed by providers when discussing the transferability of individual competencies across different levels. Providers noted that, while credit was formally permitted, they had concerns about the capacity of the students:

And also I guess some of the competencies that are delivered across different levels within the training package that are common to different levels are creating some interesting issues. An example, one instance would be there is [a module] which can be delivered at Certificate II but it is certainly a key unit in our diploma. So it is assessed at certificate II in VET in Schools and then the student will come along a year or two later, enrol in the diploma and get credit for that unit. However they will have some [serious] gaps in their knowledge. (Provider, agriculture)

Overall, providers are packaging competencies to allow for cross-industry qualifications but they are doing so selectively and somewhat tentatively. This is partly because they are learning from experience which competencies seem to be transferable and which are not, and partly because this kind of packaging requires different, and more sophisticated, pedagogical strategies from those used in more narrowly focussed training:

So, we're often, you know, I see the role of what we do is in not participating in that local environment but actually being someone who plays a role of challenging. (Provider, management and administration units)

Finally, it is important to note that a good deal of training provided is not accredited in any package even though it is offered in very similar contexts to accredited training:

OK, I suppose it's fair to say that around about half the training we do is actually accredited in that ... standard of attainment and so on. Around about another half, although it is based around the same skills, same competencies, and it is not accredited. And the reason that we deliver in both ways is because it depends on what the people's needs are. Even in the case of accredited training, we find that the people that we have as our audiences are interested far more in the skills and how they can use them to make money out of them, than they actually are in a piece of paper that they hang on the wall. So generally speaking, they are not that concerned on whether it's accredited or not and we generally look at having accreditation where it's appropriate to offer them, and even where it's not, the training program content is very similar because that sort of maintains a little bit of quality and consistency, which is important. (Provider, business units)

A number of providers packaged elements of several training packages to deliver highly customised programs that met the immediate needs of local clients:

We are teaching a course if you like at the moment, it is not a recognised course as such—the people don't get a qualification at the end of it—but we have put together a ten-day workshop program where people come along and are involved in topics such as understanding your BAS [business activity statements] and the GST [goods and services tax] as well as PAYE [pay as you earn] issues as well as an overview of the forms of ownership and sole trading, and then they go into wages and payroll, and doing financial statements, profit-and-loss balance sheets and so on. Now that is a selection of elements out of units—the agriculture and the business services or the financial services stream packages. So we have put together, on demand, this little ten-day workshop-type course that people come and attend. They are not assessed as such. However, it gives them good grounding for then going on to accredited modules and study where they gain accreditation, that leads into certificate III, IV and V really.
(Provider, agriculture)

While the provider sees this as an opportunity to introduce potential students to training, and hopes that it provides a good introduction to systematic study, elsewhere she echoes the concerns of other providers that these clients may seek to be accredited for these elements and modules, but that this will be impossible without assessment.

Research question 4: Does the customising of training packages preserve portability and opportunity to gain higher levels of skills and qualifications?

In particular, this research question was concerned to examine two key areas. Firstly, where customisation has occurred, does this narrow the qualification so it is no longer valued by other employers? Secondly, does customisation impact either positively or negatively on the opportunity for workers to gain higher level skills and qualifications?

Summary of key points

- ✧ There was a range of understandings of what was meant by portability. While portability was generally understood to refer to the national recognition of qualifications, it was also inextricably entwined with the notion of transference of skills acquired as a result of the acquisition of a qualification.
- ✧ Portability of qualifications was not raised as an issue by employers. When questioned, the response was largely determined by the industry group to which the employer belonged.
- ✧ Employers generally felt that there were generic skills that were transferable across sites and across some industries but were not convinced sufficiently of this to want to employ staff without specific knowledge and experience of the specific industry sector.
- ✧ Students felt that the generic skills learnt during training underpinned the portability of the qualification both across geographic areas and across work areas.
- ✧ Providers saw it as their role to encourage students to look at pathways.
- ✧ Students generally believed that their current qualification would assist them in accessing further qualifications.

Understandings and perceptions of portability

Portability of qualifications carries with it an inherent acceptance by all participants in the VET system of the portability of skills gained through the achieving of the qualification. The importance of portability in a national system is a key plank underpinning the National Training Framework. ANTA, in the training package development handbook states that it is critically important that the training approach:

... encourages multi-skilling and the ability to transfer competency to new situations. This leads to improved flexibility and portability of skill across the workplace. (ANTA 1999, p.2)

The Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission, in its review of industry advice on training, states that changes to the industry advisory system need to occur within the context of the National Training Framework:

... because it delivers a quality training product, nationally consistent training, portable skills for individuals and international competitiveness.

(Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission 2002, p.2)

In this project, portability of qualifications was examined through the following:

- ✧ moving from one job to another job in the same industry:
 - ◆ in the same geographic area
 - ◆ but another geographic location
- ✧ moving from one industry sector to another sector in the same industry:
 - ◆ in the same geographic location
 - ◆ but a different geographic location
- ✧ moving from one industry to another:
 - ◆ in the same geographic area
 - ◆ in a different geographic area.

Customisation and portability of qualifications

Employers, providers and students were all asked how they viewed portability and to what extent they saw knowledge, skills and experience gained in one context as being transferable to other contexts. There was continual slippage between the terms 'portability' and 'transferability' and respondents saw the concepts as inextricably entwined.

Employers were asked whether they would regard the qualifications an employee gained through training in another workplace or in a campus-based course as relevant to their workplace. They were also asked whether they would employ someone who had worked in a different industry altogether and whether generic skills made these qualifications portable.

Providers were asked for their views on portability of skills in the work environment.

Students were asked how well they thought their training would enable them to move to new geographic locations in search of work either in the same field or another field. They were also asked whether the training would enable them to move to a different job in the same industry or a different industry altogether, but in the same geographic area.

Although providers understood the importance of portability of qualifications, it was not generally an area of concern for employers. The student cohort that we interviewed had not really thought about this as an issue, and at this point in their lives, many of them indicated that they were not really thinking about moving either in terms of locations or jobs. Given the fluidity of employment in today's economic world, it is interesting to note that students were not more focussed on the importance of having nationally accredited qualifications. However, as one provider pointed out, as the national system continues to roll out and confidence in understanding and working with the system increases, it is likely that views held by both employers and students will change.

I think that what's in it for them is the transferability and transformability of a national qualification and it is slow, but it's getting there. People are understanding now what that means. (Agriculture)

Employers

In our study, employers generally spoke much more about transferability of skills rather than portability of qualifications. Although in the telephone interviews specific questions were asked about portability of qualifications, employers were more concerned about employees having both the underpinning and specific skills required to work effectively. The discussions therefore interwove issues to do with transferability of skills and portability of qualifications.

There were conflicting views about the importance of national qualifications, although the extent of disparity of opinions was related to the industry sector to which the employer belonged. The aged care sector was committed to the need for a national system and this is probably related to the national system of accreditation which applies to aged care facilities. Employers from the agricultural and tourist sectors were generally less interested in formal qualifications and more focussed on demonstration of skill, and this is probably influenced by the nature of the industry, in terms of a heavy reliance on casual and seasonal workers.

... a farmer's not going to employ them entirely on 'show me what qualifications you've got' and more likely to have a beer with them down in the pub and if they fit in and are what they deem as a hard worker, that doesn't just mean physical work. They actually place a lot of value on your work ethic, which is, if I do the right thing by this farmer, I know he's going to do the right thing by me. (Provider, agriculture)

However, this view is changing. As tourism becomes more and more dependent on overseas travellers who are seen to expect higher levels of service, the standards will increase, but because it is still largely a seasonal industry, employers want staff who are already trained and ready to start work as required. The agricultural sector is also becoming more involved as a global player and this means that there are international quality standards that need to be implemented and adhered to. This, in turn, has implications for the staff who are employed. Global competitiveness has also forced farmers into diversifying their produce and again this means that farmers are requiring more highly skilled workers who have knowledge and skills in a broader range of areas.

In the discussions with employers about portability and transferability, eight of the nine employers interviewed believed that at least the generic skills employees were learning as part of their training were transferable.

Because I mean customer service, all your basic things that aren't necessarily tourism-related that they still do would apply to any business. (Tourism)

Yes, it is just common-sense sort of stuff. For example, if it was factory work even, I mean just the basic OH&S [occupational health and safety] skills are beneficial for anything like that. Then there is probably manual handling, just common sense practices really. Chemical management, all those sorts of things. (Aged care)

There are lots of personal skills that will be transferable. I mean your reception duties, they are transferable to any industry, no matter whether it is a workshop or a doctor's surgery or anywhere you have got to meet people and take details over the counter. Or say your telephonist duties—you have got to be good on the phone, you have got to be able to talk to people, handle them and find out what they want, give them the right information, follow it up etc. Your actual bookkeeping and accounting skills, your typing in details into your computer, how efficient you are with that, how efficient you are with your bookkeeping, your cash register has to be balanced every day, that is good in any industry that runs any sort of cash. (Tourism)

A few employers discussed transference of more industry-specific skills. An employer in the aged care sector felt that the skills trainees learnt through participating in training for the Certificate III in Aged Care were transferable to other towns and other industries.

Because when you stop and think about it, the accreditation is across the whole of Australia. So we are looking at the same standards. So I think that even though each facility is unique, across the board you would be looking at pretty similar things. I think you can use the skills in a lot of areas. (Aged care)

This next employer, from the travel industry, believed that while there are generic skills underpinning all retail selling, travel requires such industry-specific knowledge that there can only be a one-way transference.

The skills you require for retail travel are specific to retail travel. Whilst they transfer across to other retail industries, it wouldn't work the other way. So the idea of being able to sell things and being able to market things and all that are transferable outside retail travel, but I don't think you can transfer into it without having more training. That could be on the job or formal.
(Tourism)

A few employers actually commented that one of the advantages of undertaking accredited training was its portability across Australia.

You can do this certificate with us as a trainee and you can go anywhere in Australia and get a job. And that is the truth.
(Aged care)

An acceptance of the portability of qualifications is underpinned by an acknowledgement by employers that what has been learnt in one environment can be transferred and adjusted to reflect a different set of workplace realities. Billett (1999) discusses how transference can be fostered.

Ideally, the knowledge secured through workplace learning will be more or less transferable to other circumstances (new tasks) and across settings in which the same vocational practice is conducted ... This prospect is most likely to be realised if the learners have a rich base of knowledge in a particular context, with links and abstractions being made to other situations.
(Billett 1999, p.158)

To test the extent to which this held true in practice, employers were asked first of all, if they would employ someone who had a qualification in a similar industry, for example, working in tourism with a qualification in hospitality and secondly, would this also apply to people who had a qualification gained in a totally different area of work. Most employers were definite that it was not the actual qualification that would determine employment outcomes. They were more interested in the skills that potential employees brought with them, although there were mixed views on whether it was specific industry skills they would look for, generic skills such as ability to work in a team, or attitudinal factors such as attitude to work.

The following quote came from an employer who was primarily interested in general skills, believing that with the 'right' approach and attitude, the enterprise-specific knowledge could be taught on the job.

Our casual girl was actually from a nursing background, but she has done extremely well. I think you need your basic skills in tourism, you need to be a people person and the rest can follow, the rest can come with training.
(Tourism)

However, in the aged care industry with its specific requirements, intra-industry skills were seen to be useful, but inter-industry skills were not seen as being as portable as in other industries.

I guess I would look, but I would still be looking for just your normal hands-on practical nursing skills for this industry. You do need to consider the fact that you do need to have people who have the skills to work in the industry.
(Aged care)

Providers

Providers as a group were much more convinced of the need for and importance of, the portability of qualifications across Australia. However, some providers made the point that, in the agricultural sector, part of the reason that farmers have traditionally not really been interested in obtaining a qualification was that they do not see themselves changing jobs or careers. Farming has always been vulnerable due to climatic conditions but now that international forces make it even more so, farmers and their children are increasingly looking for alternative careers. This has led to a changing perspective on the value of qualifications.

... the culture is changing because in the last 10 years we've probably had more people leave farms than we've had young people start on farms. And so we're seeing more and more of a shift in that culture to say, 'am I employable outside this industry? Yes, I am but I don't have a bit of paper to say what I can do, maybe I do need a bit of paper to demonstrate that portability of skill'.
(Agriculture)

Many providers spoke about the strategies they use to encourage students to think about transferring skills to other situations and other environments as a means of maintaining the national integrity of a qualification. When we asked providers to describe the process they used, most of them gave the example of a generic skill which had been customised to reflect a specific worksite, such as the way a particular employer might want to file invoices. Students would then be asked to talk about other systems they knew of, or to visit other sites.

One provider emphasised the need to encourage students to reflect on their life experiences rather than just relying on a formal ‘problem-solving’ unit of work within a training program.

For most people it would be an incredible combination, you know, of experiences and formal and informal training. I mean, if you’ve had to go through the business of reconfiguring your bank loans as a result of the drought and had to negotiate with bank managers, you understand about the costs of money and all that kind of stuff—that’s a generic skill you can take to run a motel tomorrow.

Providers however, often commented on the tension between customising and portability.

I think that when you look at any region, just its being in a rural setting or in a remote setting already puts you aside. I mean you look at somewhere like here that is so vibrant and lively, but it is very isolated and it is very far from anywhere else, so you do have to function differently in the way you run your business and in the way you carry out your tasks in industry than you do somewhere else. I think the organisation is well aware that the qualification they give does really need to be a national qualification. But that’s the juggle ...

(Tourism)

Providers were aware that when they spoke to employers about training outcomes, employers were very focussed on the need to tie training specifically into their own work practices. Sometimes this meant that the time was not available, particularly in on-the-job training, to explore the broader issues related to these practices with students. Yet the broader, more generic application of these situated skills is fundamental to maintaining the portability of the qualification.

You ought to be able to say you’ve got a competency in marketing, it doesn’t really matter whether the context you developed that in was a cultural centre where you’re selling art products or somewhere else, you know. It seems to me that the portability thing ... is important to maintain. So I guess I’m not real keen about customisation that allows all of that to be changed, so that it’s not portable.

This concern was noted by Billett and Hayes (2000). They comment that customising training to an enterprise level can lead to the erosion of portable qualifications and broad long-term industry goals. The dilemma for providers becomes how to combine local enterprise demands for training customised to meet site requirements and the need to support career options for individuals, as well as maintain the strategic national industry and educational perspectives.

Students

When asked whether the qualifications they had received would facilitate their gaining employment in the same industry anywhere in Australia, all but one student believed this would be so.

I think it is good because they sort of focus on Australia-wide rather than just this area. They base it in this area and you do all your work in this area, but they sort of focus it all over Australia.

(Agriculture)

When students were asked if their current qualification would assist them in moving to another industry, those who believed it would, said it was because of the generic skills they had learnt during the training.

One student said:

It has helped build my confidence in myself knowing that I can achieve my goals when I set my mind to it. I think it has taught me to believe in myself. So I do think it would help in any job.

(Aged care)

Another student commented that:

I reckon it would be good because of the way we get to speak to people and like if the skills are relevant, like computer skills, phone skills and stuff like that. (Tourism)

This study was unable to track ex-students who could comment on their experiences in terms of how portable their qualifications actually turned out to be. A critical issue that may affect portability is the degree to which the training has been customised to meet the needs of specific enterprises. Billett and Hayes note that enterprises may only want those aspects of the training that are immediately applicable to their worksite and therefore employees do not have the opportunity to actually complete the qualification. They found that where customisation occurs to this extent:

Such an outcome could be positive for individuals where opportunities for advancement and career development exist—that is, where a specialism has the potential to address the aspirations and needs of the individuals. However, alternatively, where such progression is not possible, these provisions may well inhibit individuals' aspirations and potential. In addition, it was evident that enterprise-based provisions are not allowing individuals to complete certification requirements, thereby inhibiting portability. (Billett & Hayes 2000, p.40)

Limiting the number of competencies available to students was an issue noted earlier in this report. In the context of training packages, the concern was raised by the TAFE Directors (2001) that issues of funding have impacted on the number of competencies offered in pathways to qualifications. This clearly has major implications for students and serves to further disadvantage students from regional and remote areas who may be competing for jobs in other locations.

Area consultative committees

Although area consultative committees were not asked directly about portability, they made a number of comments about the need to customise and the impact of this on portability. These comments were made during their conversations about the skills required in regional communities:

There is the possibility that the skills that are learnt are not necessarily portable to the industry in another part of the country. Even within the same industry. There are very different ways of doing the things that they do. For example, let's take agriculture, the farming-type techniques in dry land farming areas would be fundamentally different to higher rainfall areas up the east coast for example. So the skills are very different and not necessarily portable.

Another area consultative committee spokesperson made the observation that portability was particularly important for students coming from regional areas, given that employment opportunities are likely to be limited in their home town.

There has to be a balance I guess between what people want to do because people may well train here and then go off somewhere else and do that job—and also what needs to be available locally here so that people actually can move from training to a job in [this region].

In a number of regions there was concern expressed that, due to local skill shortages, expertise was imported from other parts of Australia. One of the area consultative committee representatives spoke about portability in terms of his region developing skills in areas that would enable them to export skills around the country.

[We need to] keep standards to a level that we can export skills. That is the goal we have here, that trainers or people in the industry would have skills we can export. So if we are customising our training a lot, we need to make sure that we keep standards to a level that is acceptable in other places.

Customisation and access to higher-level skills and qualifications

Providers were asked to identify how they encouraged students to gain higher levels of skills and qualifications.

Students were asked how well they thought their training would equip them to access further training either in the same or a different field.

Providers

All providers stated that they encouraged students to consider further options in further education.

Right from when they come into the course we are talking about where they can go once they have finished their course with employment and with study ... And the way we do that is as we are going through the subjects, applying what they are learning to different areas ...

Because I see when they are doing courses here, we have a responsibility to encourage them to work within the area that we are training them for but also to develop them, to help them develop and to encourage them to go on to further education. (Aged care)

We structure their program to allow them to follow on to the next level, so the qualifications are like nested, so you could start with a certificate II and flow straight on to a certificate III. We have quite a few go on to higher education. (Agriculture)

One of the respondents was an employer who also taught part time at the local TAFE institute. She was the only employer who commented on the opportunity that accredited training gave to employees to attain further qualifications. Her insight, made without any prompting on the part of the interviewer, was probably due to the dual roles she had.

I am noticing too that the things they begin on one level, like certificate II, they are quite eager then to follow and do certificate III and just sort of really advancing the skills that they have. (Tourism)

Students

Most of the students, both current and ex-students, who were employed at the time of their studies felt that the training was relevant to the work they were doing. In addition, all but one student felt that the course they were currently studying would enable them to undertake further studies in the same or a related area. One student who is currently doing a retail traineeship commented:

There are different levels of the certificate I can get. So I would definitely look into it. I am planning to look into part of the tourism one next and just what that involves and if I can do that.

When asked whether it would also help them to undertake studies in a different field, again all but one felt that it would. Those who believed it would, identified generic skills as being the key to this. One student commented:

In retail you are dealing with a lot of people in your everyday sort of work and that is involved in tourism and hospitality as well. I could relate a lot of industries to this one. This course covers a lot of different things and you can relate to other industries. (Tourism)

Another student spoke about having developed study skills which she saw as critical in being able to access further study:

I think the fact that I have been able to do assignments and get them handed in on time, and attendance, and the records that the TAFE has on me, and my participation I suppose would help me get into other courses. (Aged care)

Providers and students spoke about the broader skills learnt during current studies as being the key to supporting access to further qualifications. An investigation as to how this occurred was not possible during this project. The literature on transference of skill from one specific context to another is clear that the process is most effective when students are able to reflect on what they have learnt and discuss the application of skills and knowledge to new contexts. However, the process is just as applicable for students who need to transfer how they learnt in one environment to another, or what has helped them in the learning process that they could then apply in another course.

Summary

In generating responses to the four research questions, it was important to explore the tensions between the range of stakeholders, between the need for generic and specific skills, and the need to address local and global demands.

In some cases, the key issues and concerns raised by the stakeholder groups coincided, although there were also issues and concerns that were specific to each group.

Providers

- ✧ Although providers placed a high priority on customising to meet the needs of the enterprise, they cited funding issues as the critical factor impacting on their ability to do so.
- ✧ Providers were conscious of the tensions between configuring units of competency to meet employer needs and being able to offer a qualification to meet employee expectations.
- ✧ Providers were acutely aware of the need to maintain the integrity of a qualification while still meeting employer needs.
- ✧ Providers supported the idea of cross-industry qualifications, believing this was possible in areas such as business administration, customer service and management. They were not sure whether this also could apply to highly regulated areas such as occupational health and safety.
- ✧ Providers saw it as an intrinsic component of their role to encourage students to access further training.

Students

- ✧ The needs of different groups of students were not consistently met or even identified.
- ✧ Students saw the generic aspects of training in which they were involved as being transferable across industries.

Employers

- ✧ Employers require and expect customisation of training in relation to mode, time and place of delivery of training.
- ✧ Employers generally believed that the training provided reflected their needs.
- ✧ Employers were not generally concerned by issues of portability of qualifications.
- ✧ While they believed that some skills could be transferred across sites and some industries, they were also concerned about the need for sector-specific skills.

Community

- ✧ There is a need to balance the immediate and future needs of industry and specific enterprise sites with the needs of other stakeholders in the system.
- ✧ The economic futures of communities are dependent on their ability to meet global imperatives and identify opportunities for growth. Current funding regimes appear to militate against training providers being proactive in identifying and meeting these potential training demands.

Delivery of training

- ✧ Some trainers offered examples of good practice through their understanding of the interconnectedness of generic and specific skills. This practice is exemplified through the construction of learning as situated, shared and experiential.
- ✧ Training is most effective in meeting the needs of local communities when it is negotiated through the use of local brokers who understand specific local contexts.

Conclusion

Implications

This study has identified a number of predictable (and predicted) tensions between the demands for specificity and reflexivity at the local and industry sector level, in terms of mode of delivery, time and place of delivery, content and packaging, and national and international demands for a mobile, flexible and responsive workforce. These tensions will never be resolved. The goal here was to observe the ways they are managed at local sites.

While participants from each of the stakeholder groups (with the exception of current and former students) mentioned these tensions as an inhibiting factor in developing effective training for their local and regional communities, they rarely identified an explicit strategy for managing them. The most common response, this study demonstrates, was for providers and employers to negotiate the immediate demands of the specific workplace and address those demands, sometimes uncomfortably, within the parameters of the training packages (thus satisfying the need for national portability, at least at a technical level), while commonly ignoring (or at least not commenting on) the need for context-specific training focussed on regional or industry development needs in the medium-to-long term. The demands of industry participation in a global market were also not explicitly addressed when training delivery was negotiated.

There were two notable exceptions, however. First, some trainers resisted the dichotomy between generic and specific skills, reconceptualising skill as having both generic and specific dimensions. They viewed skill development as a matter of producing generic knowledge through critical engagement with specific enterprise or industry contexts. They aimed actively to teach students to attend to what was common and what was unique in their workplace, building skills which were likely to be transferable across industries, regions and time. This often involved developing in students certain dispositions and orientations—the habit of close analysis and critique of existing practice, for instance—which would enable them to adapt to and accommodate changed conditions. This is quite different from developing general habits of industry or courtesy which are sometimes understood to be generic skills.

Second, in some regions, specific training staff or other personnel were explicitly dedicated to the process of bringing stakeholders together to broker training that went beyond a simple set of compromises to produce instead, training that at least had the potential to be simultaneously immediately useful and transferable to different contexts. A distinguishing feature of these approaches was their cost, at least at the delivery stage. They were expensive because they demanded much more time than was generally available in routine programs and they were expensive because they relied on very skilled personal.

It was beyond the scope of this study to evaluate these approaches, and in some cases, the approaches were in the very early stages and no evaluation was possible. We believe, however, that the tensions between the demands of specific enterprise contexts and the demands of learners, industries, providers and markets, will persist. It is critical that local communities identify these tensions and develop ways of managing them which exploit the pedagogical and developmental possibilities of these tensions rather than deny or decry them. To put it more strongly, perhaps the

most fundamental challenge for training, and for regional development, over the next ten years will be its ability to develop in learners and communities a capacity to integrate the global and the local in ways which produce the kind of knowledge and skill that is immediately and locally useful, while at the same time being adaptive and generative. The economic and social resilience of local communities will rely on it. At a more specific level, this study suggests that existing funding regimes are shaping training delivery in unintended and unproductive ways and this is impacting on specific groups of learners (most obviously seasonal workers, but also any student who does not fit the 'default' model constructed in specific training packages or within particular delivery frameworks), with potentially damaging consequences for individuals and for enterprise and regional development.

We note the concern that many providers expressed that they could not attract and keep skilled educators, and we are aware that the approaches we have proposed rely on educators who are not only well trained but who maintain and develop their professional capacity. A critical component of this professional capacity is the ability to engage with all stakeholders involved in the training. Establishing credibility takes time and this credibility may be lost when the particular teacher/trainer is no longer involved. Succession planning becomes essential to maintain 'faith' in the local community. In this study, only one teacher had implemented steps to address this issue and this was an individual rather than a system or institutional process. It is not clear how local and regional communities can get reliable access to the highest standards of professional expertise, but it is critical to the success of training programs, especially in the increasing number of communities which need to make transitions from traditional industry bases to new industries where local embedded knowledge is not available.

This project had as its focus four research questions:

- ✧ Who are the stakeholders, and what do they want?
- ✧ How, and to what extent, are training packages customised at local sites to meet the needs of stakeholders?
- ✧ To what extent are providers packaging competency standards to allow for cross-industry qualifications?
- ✧ Does the customisation of training packages preserve portability and opportunity to gain higher levels of skills and qualifications?

This project was also concerned to address the overarching question: How are these tensions managed at individual local sites?

Key findings

- ✧ *Who are the stakeholders, and what do they want?*

Key stakeholder groups are not comprehensively identified and represented. While some groups (like individual employers) were generally understood to be key stakeholders, other apparently obvious groups (like certain categories of students) were not spontaneously nominated. This has important implications for the manner in which their interests are represented and attended to within local and regional VET systems.

- ✧ *How, and to what extent, are training packages customised at local sites to meet the needs of stakeholders?*

The successful customisation of training packages involves complex and imaginative collaboration and negotiation between the competing interests of stakeholder groups. While this project demonstrates that it can be achieved, it often isn't, and when it is successful, it is often prohibitively expensive in terms of the time and skill demands made on the negotiator (often the workplace trainer). However, a number of collaborative practices were identified which

seemed to bring together the demands of the immediate context with a mutually agreed development agenda in productive ways. While the specificity of context means that these practices could probably not be emulated in other places, if the principles that underpin them could be articulated, they would be helpful to other communities embarking on collaborative processes.

- ❖ *To what extent are providers packaging competency standards to allow for cross-industry qualifications?*

Employers, providers and area consultative committees want, and believe it is possible to achieve, cross-industry qualifications in defined areas (notably business administration, customer service and clerical work) but this kind of packaging occurs only occasionally.

- ❖ *Does the customisation of training packages preserve portability and opportunity to gain higher levels of skills and qualifications?*

The major challenge identified by the stakeholder groups was the need to maintain portability of qualifications while at the same time customising competencies to meet the specific needs of local contexts. While some providers addressed this tension by reframing their practice to teach students the macro skill of attending to context, others experienced the tension as irresolvable.

- ❖ *How are these tensions managed at individual local sites?*

While some communities consciously and actively ‘manage’ the tensions between stakeholders, between the need for specific and generic skills, between the demands of the local community and national and global interests, and between immediate and future needs, most do not consciously do so. Where this is successfully accomplished, it relies on the skill and the will of one or two very able and committed individuals, most commonly individual workplace educators or area consultative committee staff members. When these staff members leave, their initiatives appear to have no practical systemic support (in terms of staff development or other resourcing) at the community level.

Implications for the VET system

Practice

- ❖ Local and regional communities should be encouraged to identify regional and industry needs of training in the medium-to-long term (as well as the immediate needs of local employers) and customise training to take account of these needs.
- ❖ Local and regional communities should be encouraged to consider the ways in which local industry is, or will be affected, by global markets and the ways that training can be customised to exploit the possibilities offered by global markets.
- ❖ Providers should pay specific attention to succession planning.

Policy

- ❖ In policy documents and in training packages, the dichotomy between generic and specific skills should be avoided, and the more productive view of skill development as a matter of producing generic knowledge through critical engagement with specific enterprise or industry contexts be promoted.
- ❖ The role of training broker in local and regional communities should be explicitly acknowledged and funded.
- ❖ Funding regimes should be interrogated for their likely impact on training delivery to particular categories of potential students (like seasonal workers) and for the ways in which they intersect with other policy domains (like unemployment benefits) at the local level.

- ✧ Support should be provided to local and regional communities to develop a comprehensive training plan which actively manages the tensions identified in this report.

Research

In the light of these findings, we believe that a research agenda for training demands:

- ✧ close ethnographic studies of the processes by which local and regional communities identify and collaborate with stakeholder groups (and fail to identify others) to develop regional training programs, timetables and delivery methods
- ✧ carefully calibrated, multi-method longitudinal research studies which follow innovative programs explicitly attempting to address these issues beyond their development and delivery phases to test the durability of the learning for individuals and for enterprises, industries and regional communities.

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Appendix 1: Methodology

Data collection

Selection of regions

One region was selected from each state or territory with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory as the research was concerned with training in regional communities. Regions were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- ✧ non-metropolitan area
- ✧ regional centre
- ✧ had at least two different types of providers operating in the region, for example, a TAFE and a private provider
- ✧ had not recently been involved in a major VET research project
- ✧ had providers delivering at least two of the nominated training packages.

In addition to these common criteria, regions were selected, which together covered a range of diverse conditions. To obtain a detailed picture of the range of factors impacting on training in regional areas, there needed to be coverage of areas which were:

- ✧ economically depressed
- ✧ economically buoyant
- ✧ utilise providers from outside the local region
- ✧ deliver training packages primarily by distance
- ✧ include seasonal and/or casual workers
- ✧ include Indigenous workers.

The following sites were selected for the telephone interviews:

- ✧ New South Wales: Wagga
- ✧ Northern Territory: Katherine
- ✧ Queensland: Ipswich
- ✧ South Australia: Port Lincoln
- ✧ Tasmania: Burnie
- ✧ Victoria: Morwell
- ✧ Western Australia: Broome

Selection of stakeholders

The following groups of stakeholders were identified:

- ✧ providers including TAFE institutes, private providers, group training companies, adult and community education providers, VET in Schools providers
- ✧ area consultative committee members
- ✧ employers
- ✧ students, both current and past.

Providers

An extensive web-based search using the National Training Information Service site was conducted to identify which providers were delivering the relevant training packages in the areas that had already been identified as potential sites for the telephone interviews. A list of providers and the training packages they were delivering was drawn up according to area to enable identification of any gaps.

A search of the internet was also conducted to identify courses conducted in the towns in which the interviews were to occur.

A printout of TAFE institutes within Australia was obtained. Each institute was called and asked if they delivered the relevant training packages and, if so, in what locations.

Telephone calls were made to these providers to gauge initial interest in participating in the project, and if so, whether they would be able to assist with current and past students as well as with employers who might be prepared to participate. The names of heads of relevant departments were also sought.

TAFE institutes and area consultative committees were also asked whether they knew of any other providers in the area. If so, these providers were called and asked for information on the training they provided.

Area consultative committees

A list of all area consultative committees was obtained from the internet. Individual sites were accessed and information downloaded about the area as background information. Preliminary conversations were held with executive officers from relevant area consultative committees to obtain possible contacts relating to both providers and employers.

Employers

Names of possible employers were obtained through contacts, such as providers who were delivering traineeships or other forms of training, group training companies, area consultative committees. Random cold calling from listings such as yellow pages online was also undertaken. Companies were asked whether any training had been conducted in the workplace and if so what kind of training and through whom.

Students

Potential respondents were identified through employers and providers.

Selection of training packages

To enable analysis of sites in relation to each other, it was agreed with the advisory committee to focus on a limited number of training packages. Training packages were selected according to their spread and uptake in regional areas. Three training packages with broad coverage were identified.

These were:

- ✧ Agriculture
- ✧ Aged Care
- ✧ Tourism

Developing interview protocols

A series of similar interview prompts were developed for each stakeholder group (see appendix 2). Using prompts rather than a sequenced set of questions enabled the telephone interviews to be a series of semi-structured conversations. This format not only allowed for the collection of background information but also encouraged discussion of issues related to training in regional areas. The use of similar interview prompts for each group of stakeholders resulted in consistency of areas covered but also allowed for a focus on any issues relevant to that particular group.

The researchers developed a list of prompts for each stakeholder group that would elicit the information required to address each of the key research questions. These interview prompts were then mapped against the research questions. This enabled any gaps to be identified and ensured all questions would be addressed. Where necessary, the interview prompts were modified.

Draft interview prompts were forwarded to each member of the advisory group and the Ethics Committee at Monash University, then modified as required.

At this stage another mapping exercise was undertaken. This involved mapping the current contacts within each stakeholder group against the training packages and the regions. This highlighted any gaps that needed to be addressed.

Formal piloting of the interview prompts was not possible due to the scope of the project. However, the initial interviews were carefully monitored to ensure that the time allocation was appropriate and that the prompts generated and supported discussions.

Conduct of telephone interviews

Contact was made with each of the possible respondents in each stakeholder group to confirm willingness to participate in the telephone interview and to arrange times. A project summary was faxed through to ensure that respondents were fully aware of the purpose and aims of the project. An explanatory letter was also sent which detailed the process to be followed, asking for permission to record the conversation and privacy and confidentiality safeguards (see appendix 3).

At the beginning of each telephone interview the explanatory statement was read aloud by the interviewer and the respondent asked for their consent.

Respondents were advised that the interviews would require between 15–20 minutes. In most cases, the interviews continued after this, although at the 20-minute point, respondents were asked whether they would like to conclude the discussion.

Breakdown of telephone interviews

Contact	Total	Tourism	Aged care	Agriculture
Provider	16	7	6	3
Employer	11	4	6	1
Student	11	5	3	3
Ex-student	4	2	1	1
Area consultative committee	8			
Total	50	18	16	8

Selecting the case study sites

The three case study sites were selected from the regions researched during phase 1.

Between them, the key criteria which were used to select the three selected sites were:

- ✧ an economically depressed area
- ✧ an economically buoyant area
- ✧ an area which has or is redefining itself from one form of economy to another
- ✧ an area which included seasonal workers
- ✧ an area which included Indigenous workers.

The researchers believed that these factors were the most critical in providing relevant information to address the key research questions. They allowed the researchers to examine the role and function that training plays in the economic (and social) wellbeing of a community. The other criteria, namely:

- ✧ coverage of the nominated training packages
- ✧ utilisation of providers from outside the area
- ✧ delivery by distance mode

had been addressed sufficiently during the telephone interviews.

Telephone interviews with respondents in the areas other than the case study areas were reviewed to determine whether issues had been raised that needed to be addressed in the interviews with participants during the case study visits.

Telephone interviews in the selected areas were reviewed to identify whether there were any areas that needed to be addressed in more detail, or whether there were gaps that had been discussed by other participants.

Where it was believed that additional information could be gained from having face-to-face meetings with telephone interview respondents, these were arranged prior to the visit. In a number of cases, new respondents had been suggested either through personal networks or through the telephone interviews. Interviews were then arranged with these additional respondents.

Summary of case study interviews

A total of 27 face-to-face interviews were conducted over the three case study sites. The following table provides a summary of these interviews.

Contact	Total	Tourism	Aged Care	Agriculture
Area Consultative Committee	2			
Provider, Consultant	8	4	1	3
Employer	4	2	2	
Student	9	9		
Ex-student	0	0		
Employment Agency	4			

Appendix 2: Interview prompts

Interview prompts for area consultative committee representative

Background information:

What is your role within the ACC?

Can you tell me a little about the area your ACC covers?

- ✧ economic base
- ✧ main industries
- ✧ level of unemployment
- ✧ ethnic-cultural makeup

Do seasonal and/or casual workers make up a proportion of your area's workforce? Can you estimate how much?

Is there a significant Indigenous community in the area covered by your ACC?

Can you give me an overview of the training providers operating in the area of your ACC?

Training:

Can you identify any specific needs in your area that training programs should address?

What role has the area consultative committee had in the identification of training needs within the community?

What skills are particularly important in regional areas, especially in your area?

How do you measure training outcomes within the community?

Which training packages are delivered in your area?

Customising:

How much do you feel the training packages should be customised to fit the needs of your specific region?

What do you understand as the pros and cons of customising training?

Cross-industry units:

In general, how would you weigh up the advantages of generic versus specific skills training?

There have been suggestions that a cross-industry qualification would benefit workers, especially casual or seasonal workers (e.g. tourism or agriculture). In your view, would this work?

Interview prompts for current students

Background information:

Where are you studying?

What qualification will you receive?

Are you a full-time or part-time learner?

Are you employed in the industry? /looking for work in the industry?

Are you undertaking this training as part of a VET in Schools program?

Are you mostly employed seasonally, or employed permanently, or unemployed?

If you are employed within the industry:

- Why did you undertake the training? (job prospects/promotion/organised)

- How relevant do you find what you study to your job?

Are you:

- from a non-English-speaking background

- from an Indigenous background

Training package:

In terms of the training you are currently undertaking, what kind of skills and competencies would you hope to gain?

Customising:

Are there specific issues in your town, which the training needs to take into account?

(e.g. seasonal nature of work, limited career pathways)

Do you think the training you are doing adequately addresses these needs?

Do you feel that your trainer has identified any specific needs that you or your fellow students may have?

For unemployed on campus:

Is your trainer making links between your course and work opportunities in your town or area?
How?

What activities have occurred which link your training to your community or town? (e.g. site visits, guest speakers, brochures, etc.)

Would you consider continuing with further study after you have finished this course?

If yes, do you think this course will help you get into another course

in the same industry? in another industry?

Cross-industry units:

If there are limited job opportunities in your town or region, would you consider moving location to work in the same industry?

How well do you think your training would prepare you for this?

How well do you think your training would help if you stayed in the same town but moved to a different industry?

And how about if you stayed in your town, got a job with a different organisation but doing a similar job to what you do now?

And finally, do you think the training you are doing now would help you at all if you moved to a different town and a different industry?

Interview prompts for ex-students

Background information:

What VET certificate did you receive or were you studying towards?

Did you study on campus or at work?

If this was on campus, were you employed in the industry at the time? Yes No

If yes, are you still employed in that industry? If no, were you employed in another industry? (please specify which) If no, were you unemployed?

Did you engage in training through a VET in Schools program?

Are you mostly employed seasonally, casually or permanently?

Do you come from:

– a non-English speaking background?

– an Indigenous background?

Customising: (define use of terms)

Are there specific issues in your town, which training needs to take into account? (e.g. seasonal nature of work, limited career pathways, etc.)

Do you think the training you completed adequately addressed these needs?

Do you feel your trainer identified any specific needs that you or your fellow students may have had?

Do you feel that your trainer made links between your course and work opportunities in your area?

Are you currently, or would you consider, continuing with further study?

Would this be another qualification within the same industry or for another industry? (If another industry, specify which one)

Do you think the training you completed would help you get into another course:

– in the same industry? – in another industry?

Cross-industry units:

If there are limited job opportunities in your town or region, would you consider moving location to work in the same industry?

How well do you think the training you completed would prepare you for this?

How well do you think this training would help you if you stayed in the same town but moved to a different industry?

And how about if you stayed in your town, got a job with a different organisation but in the industry in which you studied?

And finally, do you think the training you did would help you at all if you moved to a different town and a different industry?

Interview prompts for employers

Background:

What is the predominant industry in which your organisation is involved ?

What is your position within the organisation?

What kind of work is involved in your organisation?

How many employees does your organisation have at this location? at others?

How was the need for training identified?

❖ management?

❖ employee request?

❖ approach by external training provider?

❖ other (if other please specify)?

Is your training conducted on or off site?

How many employees are currently participating in training?

How many have in the past?

Training package:

Are you familiar with the TP for your industry? How familiar are you with its contents?

How well do you feel the TP meets the needs of your employees? The organisation?

Does your organisation specify the competencies you feel are relevant and should be taught?

How do you measure training outcomes within the workplace?

Customising: (define customisation and contextualisation to interviewee)

How much do you feel the TP should be customised in your workplace to fit the needs of a) your employees b) your organisation?

Cross-industry units:

In general, how would you weigh up the advantages of generic versus specific skills training?

Do you think the skills your employees are learning are transferable? (to other industries/to other towns?) Do you understand this as beneficial?

If an employee comes to you having obtained qualifications through work in a similar industry, how relevant would you understand this training to your own workplace?

There have been suggestions that a cross-industry qualification would benefit workers, especially casual or seasonal (e.g. tourism and agriculture). In your view, would this work?

Interview prompts for providers

Background information:

Can you give me some information about your organisation (what courses/what TPs/TAFE? Private?)

Where do you deliver?

How many of your students are employed in the industry?

Which of the following groups are represented in your area?:

- ✧ Indigenous workers
- ✧ seasonal workers
- ✧ NESB
- ✧ casual workers
- ✧ school leavers

Training packages and training program:

Which training package(s) do you deliver in this region?

Which qualifications?

Which units?

How do you choose?

Can you talk me through the way you design your training program?

Can we look at all the groups we identified above. How well do you feel their needs are addressed by the TP? And how well by your training program?

If you are conducting training in a workplace, how well do you think the TP meets the needs of:
a) the employer? b) individual learners? Have employers or learners commented on how well it meets their needs?

Customising: (use pre-written definitions of customising and contextualisation)

Have you taught this TP in other regions/towns? besides—(insert name of area)?

How different are the needs, within the same industry and TP, between this location and others you've taught in?

How much does your teaching take into account this particular area and its particular needs?

What are the pros and cons of customising your training program?

How do you customise? Can you give an example?

Cross-industry units:

Are there cross industry competencies in the TP you use?

Do you think they're transferable? (e.g. customer service? team skills?)

Why? Why not? What issues arise?

Do you know of any examples where skills have been gained in one industry and then successfully applied to working in another industry?

If yes, examples, if no, because you don't know of any examples; or because you don't believe these skills are transferable?

In what ways do you incorporate and encourage the students' access to further education in your training program? Can you answer this in relation to: further training in the same TP? Further education in general?

Other issues:

Are there constraints on the development of a quality training program? Can you identify what they are?

- ✧ access to resources?
- ✧ funding issues?
- ✧ unrealistic time frames?
- ✧ employers' expectations?
- ✧ remoteness and isolation?
- ✧ TP constraints?
- ✧ lack of professional development for trainers?

Appendix 3: Explanatory letter

To be read over the phone to (registered training organisations) participants of telephone interviews

Project title: *Serving local needs in local and regional communities*

My name is [Tanya Wolkenberg, research assistant]. I am doing research for Linda Wyse and Associates and Monash University, under the supervision of Linda Wyse and Lesley Farrell.

The aim of this project is to identify how well the vocational education and training (VET) system is serving the client needs in local and regional communities. Client needs in this context could be students, employers, and the local community as a whole. We are particularly interested in looking at training packages in the areas of tourism, aged care (community services), and agriculture. I am looking to speak to registered training organisations and trainers who are providing training in any of these three training packages in regional communities across Australia.

What I am asking for is between fifteen and twenty minutes of your time to take part in a telephone interview. If you agree this will be taped on an audio tape. I will be asking you about how relevant you feel the training package you use is to your community, and the extent to which you customise and contextualise it to meet the needs of your community. This information will not be shared with your organisation, with students or with employers. When we write the final report we will not use your name in connection with your comments, although you can be acknowledged by name at the end of the report as having made a contribution to the process.

To begin with, we are only conducting telephone interviews. Later in the year we will be writing detailed case studies of three regions in Australia. We do not yet know which regions these will be. If your region were chosen you would have the option of meeting either Linda Wyse or Lesley Farrell (the two chief researchers for this project) face to face. You would not have to do this if you were not interested. Even if you want to continue with this telephone interview you would still not need to meet with them unless you were interested and had the time. We will be writing a report for National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), which is a government policy and research organisation.

If at any time you do not wish to answer my questions you do not have to. You may end this interview at any time. If you have any questions about what I am doing, please ask me. I will give you my telephone number so that you can contact me. If you are unhappy about any part of this project, you can contact the Ethics Committee of Monash University. Their telephone number is (03) 9905 2052.

Informed consent form

Project title: *Serving local needs in local and regional communities*

I agree to take part in the above Monash University research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have heard the explanatory statement, which I will keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

- ✧ be interviewed by the researcher
- ✧ allow the interview to be audiotaped.

I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party

I also understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

Signature Date.....

Appendix 4: Interview data form

Interview Data Form category: **ACC REP**

RESEARCH PROMPT	RESPONSE	COMMENT
Do seasonal and/or casual workers make up a proportion of your area's workforce? Can you estimate how much?		
What is the ethnic-cultural makeup of the area? Indigenous? NESB?		
How much do you feel the training packages should be customised to fit the needs of your specific region?		
What do you understand as the pros and cons of contextualising training?		
Are there skills that are particularly important in regional areas, especially in your area?		
What role has the ACC had in the identification of training needs within the community?		
Do you think they're transferable? Why? Why not? What issues arise?		
In general, how would you weigh up the advantages of generic versus specific skills training?		

RESEARCH PROMPT	RESPONSE	COMMENT
Are you employed in the industry? Seasonally/Casually/Permanently?		
Are you from: - a non-English-speaking background? - an Indigenous background?		
Is your trainer making links between your course and work opportunities in your town or area?		
Do you feel that your trainer has identified any specific needs that you or your fellow students may have?		
How well do you think your training would help if you stayed in the same town but moved to a different industry?		
Would you consider continuing with further study after you have finished this course?		
If yes, do you think this course will help you get into another course in the same industry? in another industry?		
If there are limited job opportunities in your town or region, would you consider moving location to work in the same industry?		

RESEARCH PROMPT	RESPONSE	COMMENT
Are you mostly employed seasonally, casually or permanently?		
Do you come from: - a non-English-speaking background? - an Indigenous background?		
Do you feel that your trainer made links between your course and work opportunities in your area?		
Are there specific issues in your town, which training needs to take into account? (e.g. seasonal nature of work, limited career pathways, etc.)		
Do you think the training you completed adequately addressed these needs?		
Are you currently, or would you consider, continuing with further study?		
If there are limited job opportunities in your town or region, would you consider moving location to work in the same industry?		

RESEARCH PROMPT	RESPONSE	COMMENT
How well do you feel the training package meets the needs: (a) of your employees? (b) the organisation?		
To what extent do you feel the training package was/is customised in your workplace to fit the needs of: (a) your employees (b) your organisation?		
Does your organisation specify the competencies you feel are relevant and should be taught?		
Do you think the skills your employees are learning are transferable?		
Have you ever employed someone who learned relevant skills in another industry? What were those skills? How difficult was it to transfer them?		
There have been suggestions that a cross-industry qualification would benefit workers, especially casual or seasonal. In your view, would this work?		
If an employee comes to you having obtained qualifications through work in a similar industry, how relevant would you understand this training to your own workplace?		

RESEARCH PROMPT	RESPONSE	COMMENT
Which of these groups are represented in your area?: indigenous workers, seasonal workers, NESB, casual workers, VET-in-schools students		
What do you understand by customising? And what by contextualisation?		
What factors impact on your ability to deliver training that reflects the needs of groups in this community? In regional communities in general?		
How different are the needs, within the same industry and TP, between this location and others you've taught in?		
How much does your training take into account this area and its particular needs?		
What do you understand by customising? And what by contextualisation?		
Are there cross industry competencies in the TP you use?		
Do you think they're transferable? Why? Why not? What issues arise?		
Do you know of any examples where skills have been gained in one industry and then successfully applied to working in another?		
In what ways do you incorporate and encourage students' access to further education in your training program? Answer this in relation to further training in the same TP, and in general?		



The National Centre for Vocational Education Research is Australia's primary research and development organisation in the field of vocational education and training.

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