

DOING THE RESEARCH IS ONLY HALF THE JOB: THE IMPACT OF VET RESEARCH ON DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract: In this paper the proposition that vocational education research ought to have a greater impact on theory and practice is explored. The development of a new approach in Australia is outlined. This approach is based on three key elements. First, was a deliberate strategy over the past decade to increase the amount of research being undertaken. Second were steps taken to improve the relevance of that research to policy development and decision making processes. Third is a variety of ways now being instigated to ensure the utilisation of that research by various stakeholders in the vocational education and training sector. The key message is that doing research is only half the job.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s a new theme began to emerge in the international literature about education research, including vocational education research. That theme concerned the notion that such research ought to impact on decision making and policy in a more substantial way than had occurred in the past. Bengtsson (1997) described such a trend in the work of the Organisation for Economic Corporation and Development (OECD), and OECD (1995), Hegarty (1999) and Rokika (1999) document examples from a wide variety of countries around the world about the greater utilisation of education research in decision making.

Despite these developments, it is clear that too often policy and decision making processes remain quite separate from research processes. Major decisions are taken without any direct reference to research. Much research remains 'researcher or curiosity driven' with no direct relevance to the policy relevant issues, let alone being part of the policy process.

In this paper, we explore some major developments in vocational education and training (VET) that have occurred in Australia in recent years to try to ensure that VET research plays a much more direct role in policy and decision making.

INCREASING THE AMOUNT OF VET RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN

Research in VET in Australia has grown rapidly in the past decade. Significant programs of research, statistical collection and analysis are under way. Research in this area is undertaken within key research centres, in universities, in VET institutions and within State and Territory training

authorities. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is a national publicly funded agency which oversees and co-ordinates much of this research, as well as undertaking its own in-house program of research. NCVER also manages national surveys and collects national VET statistics.

However, Australia entered the 1990's with a very small VET research base. There was a paucity of VET research, apart from the modest program of research carried out at that time by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. A number of commentators pointed to a lack of VET research in comparison with other sectors (McDonald et al 1993, Ramsay 1993, Butterworth 1994). Even more pertinent were the findings that this lack of VET research meant that research was a much lower than optimal influence on the formulation of VET policy and practice in Australia (Hall 1993, McDonald et al 1993, Wiltshire 1993, Robinson and Thomson 1998b). This history has been extensively documented in Selby Smith et al (1998).

The vastly improved contemporary effort in Australian VET research began with McDonald et al (1993) in the release of a key report on the state of Australian VET research called *No small change*. This report contained proposals for a national VET research and development strategy. Subsequently the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) established The ANTA Research Advisory Council (ANTARAC) in 1994 to increase the volume, scope and coverage of VET research. This led to a substantial increase in the funding and coverage of Australian VET research. These developments are described in Hawke and McDonald (1999). This included the growth of new research centres in addition to the NCVER so that some 20 centres undertaking VET research were operating by 1996.

Arrangements for the management of VET research in Australia were further reformed in 1996 with the rationalisation of the then separate NCVER and ANTARAC activities under the one set of national VET research arrangements that are managed by the NCVER (see Robinson 1997, Robinson and Guthrie 1998).

Central to this consolidated approach to VET research was the development of a unique national policy in 1997. This policy – *The national research and evaluation strategy for vocational education and training in Australia 1997-2000* – set the parameters for a concerted national approach to VET research in Australia. The policy was published in 1997 (NCVER 1997). The key elements of the policy are described in Robinson (1997). Almost 100 new research projects were commenced or completed in the first two years of the policy (see Robinson and Guthrie 1998), an effort which has continued since.

McGaw (1999) recently examined the impact of two major early 1990s reviews of education research in Australia. He concluded that the *No small change* review (McDonald et al 1993) had had a very major impact on changing the scope and quantity of VET research in Australia, whereas the other reviews of education research more generally had not (McGaw et al 1992). The key difference (according to McGaw 1999) is that action to initially act on review findings fell to a single agency – the Australian National Training Authority – in the case of VET research, whereas for education research more generally concerted action would have been required from a complex plethora of education agencies and institutions, and this did not materialise.

The nature of Australian VET research over the 1990s is examined in Robinson and Thomson (1998b), Robinson and Guthrie (1998) and Stevenson (2000).

INCREASING THE RELEVANCE OF VET RESEARCH

Australia's national VET research policy – *The national research and evaluation strategy for VET 1997-2000* – was based on two key elements designed to improve the relevance of research to policy and practice in the VET sector, which were:

- ❖ to hold widespread consultations with the key stakeholders/potential users of VET research to shift the emphasis away from 'researcher driven' research to ensure research priorities reflect VET stakeholder needs and requirements
- ❖ to base the research priorities on the national objectives for VET identified in Australia's national VET policy—'*A bridge to the future: Australia's National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 1998-2003*' (see ANTA 1998).

This process culminated in six key research priorities being identified in Australia's national research policy, these being research into:

- ❖ the economic and social implications for VET
- ❖ employment and workforce changes and the implications for VET
- ❖ pathways from school to work
- ❖ the outcomes of VET
- ❖ the quality of VET provision
- ❖ future issues affecting the VET sector.

INCREASING THE UTILISATION OF VET RESEARCH

In recent years NCVET has published a couple of extensive and academically thorough reports on the impact of VET research on policy. These were *The impact of research on VET decision-making* (Selby Smith et al, 1998) and *The impact of R&D on VET decision-making: A range of case studies* (Selby Smith 1999). Essentially this work found that the key impact of VET research in the past has been indirect, with research results feeding into the 'conventional wisdom' about issues, rather than directly impacting on particular decisions. Very often key decision-makers are using research results without being aware they are doing so.

Selby Smith et al (1998 p.21) found that 'The research enterprise is accumulative. Much research does not stand on its own as a piece of work, but adds to what existed before. This accumulated body of knowledge contributes in decision making to the creation of a climate of opinion and the development of a set of ideas, so that at any given time certain ideas, approaches or ways of thinking are in "good currency" while others are not.'

While this is useful, it is clear that if a concerted effort is made to make research and statistical analysis much more relevant to the contemporary needs of policy-makers, enterprises, VET authorities, VET providers and other stakeholders, then a much bigger and more direct impact from all this work can and does arise. A marketing study commissioned by NCVET (Figgis 1998) suggested the key is to alert people to the fact that there is a research story and then tell the research story properly.

In response to these notions the NCVET is now putting as much effort into developing new ways to promote research usage, as it does into doing the actual research. Over the last few years, NCVET

has been focusing increasing amounts of its attention and resources on ensuring that what it does, and manages, is produced and disseminated in forms which are useful to those in the sector.

A number of different approaches have been developed. These are described in more detail in Robinson (1999a) and include—

Core publications: Firstly, there is still a need for publications of the primary research findings information including research reports, journals and journal articles and conference papers. There is also a place for the main statistical publications derived from the national data collections and surveys. NCVER published more than 100 reports in the past year, as well as a scholarly journal (*Australian and New Zealand journal of vocational education research*) and a magazine (the *Australian training review*). Attention has been paid to producing better written and better focused executive summaries of these publications, and workshops have been run for Australian VET researchers to develop their skills in this area. However, it needs to be recognised that these primary reports tend to reach the research community rather than other stakeholders such as practitioners and policymakers. Therefore, other approaches have been taken in tandem with the publications.

Going digital: NCVER has made significant improvements over the past year to its web site and this will increasingly be the main platform used for its delivery of VET research and statistical information. New features on the web site include: research and statistical sections, summary pages for each research project, current news and events, downloadable publications, a greater number of full-text electronic publications, e-mail contacts for key staff, sophisticated auto-linking between related documents on the site using metadata, online project tender information, online registration for conferences and forums.

VOCED database: The Vocational Education and Training Research Database (VOCED) has been significantly upgraded over the past year to become a truly international research tool, providing information about VET research, policy and practice gathered from a wide range of Australian and international sources. This database has been made freely available on NCVER's web site, and is thus readily accessible to all stakeholders in the sector. This will be the subject of a presentation at the second part of this workshop.

Media: It is vital to make sure that key and current VET issues are mentioned in the media, both the specialised education media and where appropriate the mainstream media. NCVER has embarked on a more strategic program of placing research results in the various media to ensure that the outcomes of research are known about and thus do become part of the conventional wisdom.

Value added products: NCVER has begun to publish new types of research publications which are specifically designed for policymakers and others who do not need or wish to read long reports. They are known as 'at-a-glance' publications and draw together key points on a particular topic that emerge from the research findings and the statistical data we have gathered. They report on the key research results that emerge from a body of recent research work (rather than on the results of a single new research study) about a topical issue. The research studies covered include new NCVER research *and* any other relevant research. These have been very well received, as they offer an easy to read analysis of key information on issues of current relevance.

Getting the message out face to face: NCVER has continued its program of conferences, workshops and seminars, but has targeted these at specialised audiences in preference to hosting a large diffuse conference as was the practice in the past. In particular, workshops and forums have been held in capital cities across the country to provide direct information about research and trends in key areas to the people who work in VET and the people who make decisions in VET. The most important new development, however, has been the deliberate targeting of a new audience for research results – that being senior policy makers and advisors. Thus the NCVER has run face-to-face briefing sessions with senior government officials, training bodies and training authorities, employer organisations and union leaders about key developments and new research findings.

CONTRIBUTING DIRECTLY TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Better use of the research effort is a very useful exercise, but getting research to be an integral part of the policy development process is an even more potent way of ensuring that research can have a real impact on shaping VET policy. This theme was explored by Bengtsson (1997 p.167) who argued that the report *'Education research and development: trends, issues and challenges'* (OECD,1995) makes it clear that the linear model between the education researcher and the policy maker is on its way out and is being replaced by a much more interactive model in which three sets of stakeholders work together: researchers, practitioners and policy makers'.

An example of how the NCVER has been developing this approach in Australia in relation to research and policy development of Australia's apprenticeship and traineeship system is described below.

- ❖ Australia commences with a New Apprenticeship system in January 1998 based on reforms to the pre-existing apprenticeship and traineeship systems
- ❖ NCVER research (Robinson 1999b) shows that while extensive research was involved in establishing traineeships in the mid 1980s, little research had been conducted into apprenticeships and traineeships since that time
- ❖ NCVER releases a range of new statistical publications showing apprentice and trainee trends and developments
- ❖ During 1999 the NCVER embarks on a series of face-to-face briefings about apprenticeships and traineeships with government officials, national employer bodies, industry training organisations and national trade union leaders
- ❖ During 1999 the NCVER decides to undertake major new research in apprenticeships and trainees. 12 new research projects are commissioned. By the end of 2000 two major reports will be released. These are an NCVER report providing one of the most detailed analyses of apprentice and trainee trends, developments and emerging issues ever undertaken, with an accompanying volume of authored research papers reporting the findings of the new research studies that are being conducted
- ❖ Late in 1999 the national minister calls together national employer organisation to discuss emerging trades skill shortages. NCVER is asked to provide a presentation at the meeting
- ❖ Three employer-led working groups are established to examine trade skills shortages and the electrotechnology, metal fabrication and engineering, and automotive industries. NCVER is one of the members of each working group and provides considerable analytical input to each working group's report back to the minister. The working group's findings are presented to the Minister at a National Skills Forum in April 2000, together with the announcement of new policy responses
- ❖ Early in 2000 the heads of Australia's training authorities request that NCVER commission a major new work to look into reasons why some apprentices and trainees fail to complete their training and make recommendations about what strategies might be put into place to address the problems the research identifies
- ❖ Three new national skills working groups are announced in April 2000 to examine trade skills shortages in the building and construction, food and rural industries, with NCVER membership again being invited

This demonstrates in a very tangible way how more emphasis on the dissemination and utilisation of research results has developed into greater calls for research and analysis to become more integral to policy development itself.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have examined the different ways in which research can have an impact on policy development, so that real improvements to the quality and effectiveness of VET can result from the research, information-gathering and analysis effort. Australia's National Centre for Vocational Education Research has responded to this challenge by changing the ways in which the information about VET research and statistics which it produces, manages and collects is disseminated to all stakeholders.

The new approaches focus on: making sure that VET research is focused on the real information needs of key groups in the sector; making sure information is produced in a variety of forms and that it is timely, useful and has the maximum impact; improving the quality of the publications and making them more accessible; producing products which consolidate and report on a range of the research and statistical work conducted on key issues and topics of interest in the sector; ensuring that as many as possible have an opportunity to see and hear what we are doing.

This approach is evolving in a new and exciting way that leads to a quite different chronology. This is when the need for policy development itself instigates the research. Instead of asking how to make research relevant to the decision makers, perhaps a better question is how policies can be made much more relevant and useful, and durable. The answer is that they must be backed by sound research. A better balanced strategy is achieved when people are appointed to undertake genuine investigation, with fiscal responsibility and political cognisance. There is need for a fine balance between genuine enquiry and real political possibilities. Part of the role of a national research organisation like NCVET is to maintain that balance. Consciousness of the need for policy relevance should be there from the ground up, in the planning and undertaking of research and the dissemination of the findings.

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