

Getting the research program off the ground

**An interview with Professor Roger Harris,¹
leader of research activity 1: Visions and Options**

Sunday 3 July 2005

Interviewer: *Professor Harris, you've been very busy getting research activity 1 off the ground. What are the activities you've undertaken to interest and engage people in the consortium research program?*

Professor Harris:

Yes, we've been extremely busy - but it has also been very enjoyable!

We've interviewed **57 key people in all states and territories**. These have been the leaders of VET systems and peak organisations plus some institute CEOs, and people from ANTA and DEST.²

We've also conducted **five workshops and forums** in various states that have involved over 240 people, mainly VET practitioners. These people came from not only TAFE but also a range of private providers - including ACE providers, enterprise providers, commercial training organisations and industry organisations - from STAs and other institutions, including universities. We held the forums in Perth, Lorne (Vic), Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane.

We've really tried to cover **the range of VET activity** - all states and territories, public and private providers, and various categories and levels of staffing.

Interviewer: *That's a lot of activity. Why have you undertaken such a wide range of consultations?*

Professor Harris:

This first research activity is designed to '**feel the pulse**' of VET in Australia - to 'listen to voices' around the country.

The whole research program comprises nine research activities. The first and last are process activities I call 'bookends'. In between are sandwiched seven research projects on 'hot topics' in the VET sector. We conceptualised our program in terms of three intersecting circles - developing people, developing practices and developing cultures. And when we started to plan research projects and place them on this framework, what we found was really interesting! The great majority of the projects we were thinking were important tended to fall in the intersections between the circles rather than neatly in the circles themselves!

This was reinforcing to us, that **a single, homogeneous approach to developing the capability of RTOs is neither possible - nor desirable** - in the highly-diversified Australian context. Instead we needed to pitch our research focus on the development of professional development practices and

models that are closely aligned to the contexts and constraints of different types of RTOs.

So we undertook wide consultations to do four things:

- to inform, interest and enthuse people in our research program, to really get them excited about the potential of research for building capacity
- to find out what is going on in the VET sector about workforce development
- to make our research as relevant as we could make it to the felt needs in the VET sector, and
- to build connections between what is going on and the research that we are doing.

Interviewer: *What are the first impressions you've formed?*

Professor Harris:

Well, we found a whole lot of interesting things going on around the country that show **workforce development is a primary and critical concern** in most states and territories. There's a realisation of both current and emerging needs.

We also got a lot of 'info' on priorities in each state and territory. Plus very useful tips on the key people to see, the best practice sites where there are exciting initiatives happening and which we just have to visit and investigate in our case studies, the most effective means of keeping in communication with each state and territory, and so on.

There was **strong support for the research program** in all states and territories. Different interviewees said the program was timely, relevant, inclusive, comprehensive, useful, important and worthwhile.

There were some caveats - about the research program's size, capacity to involve private providers, and the need to be clear on what stakeholders were gaining in return. And they wanted the products to be simple and applicable to a range of different environments and workplace structures.

Forum participants, we found, were feeling the impact of significant change. The words they often used were negative, such as threatening, turbulent, change for change's sake, uninformed, complex, inconsistent, and straight jacketing. On the other hand, there were, of course, also many positive perceptions, and VET staff were seen to be passionate, committed, hard working, motivated, full of genuine intent and innovative.

We thought the participants were generally well informed about the drivers of change.

Overall, we had reinforced for us that **the impacts of change, and the responses to it, do vary across VET**, for example, in the differences between public and private RTOs. We need to keep this in mind at all times as we do our research.

Interviewer: *Are there any specific areas of workforce development that people are focussing on?*

Professor Harris:

If I could just give you a few examples from around the country.

Queensland has its **Future Directions Project**, which is a major project on workforce development. Phase 1 is the development of a *Staff capability framework* for the TAFE component of the workforce, and Phase 2 focuses on *Systemic workforce planning*.

Another example is in WA which has its **TAFEWA Managers Development Framework**. This outlines the range of capabilities that managers require to enable them to effectively lead and manage change, diverse situations and a multi-disciplinary workforce. It's a tool to guide people through a professional development pathway – focusing on leadership and change management. It includes performance management planning and professional development.

And TAFE Tasmania is restructuring so that it is not hierarchical but has an outcomes-focused team approach based around two main areas of **Enterprise Development** and **Career Pathways**. It has identified 10 areas as 'priority areas' for staff development and is encouraging staff and sections to focus their developmental plans in these areas. The focus in Tasmania is to shift the focus from seeking to satisfy skills requirements through recruitment, to maintaining the skills and interest of existing staff.

Interviewer: *How do these interests relate to the focuses of the research program?*

Professor Harris:

They relate very closely!

Most of the states and territories are currently in the throes of developing or redeveloping what they see as more strategic workforce development. Some of the activity is very similar, so we believe there is likely to be ready acceptance and encouragement for close cooperation between our Consortium program and their developments.

In particular, there is great interest in the states and territories in **careers in VET** and the whole issue of **succession planning**. They are also interested in **VET cultures**, in **educational leadership** in these turbulent times of change, and in how workforce development must now slot into a broader **HR frame**. These 'hot topics' are all areas we are investigating in our research program, so it is very exciting to think of the impact we will be able to have in the field once we have finished our work.

Interviewer: *What has been the greatest value of these consultations?*

Professor Harris:

Essentially, I believe that we got four main things out of these consultations:

- **informing key people** about the Consortium and its work

- obtaining their **support** firsthand
- gaining **valuable information** to assist the principal researchers in our Consortium over the next two years, and
- obtaining **valuable insights** into the varying sensitivities, contexts and areas of interest across this large continent of ours.

It's been a valuable phase in our research program. We recognise, of course, that this 'feeling the pulse' activity needs to be continued in order to keep possible tensions and sensitivities in the forefront of our minds through the life of the Consortium. But we've made a good start! And we are looking forward to getting on with our research and producing some valuable products that can be used by training providers.

Interviewer: *Thank you for your time, Professor Harris. We look forward to seeing the benefits to the VET sector from the research program.*

¹ **Professor Roger Harris** is the Director of CREEW, the Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work at the University of South Australia. He is also one of the three program directors of the Research Consortium, and the leader of research activity 1: Visions and Options.

² **Consultations included representation from:**

State Training Authorities (STAs)
 The Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector
 Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET)
 Australian Education Union (AEU)
 TAFE Directors Australia (TDA)
 Victorian TAFE Association (VTA)
 VISTA Association of VET Professionals
 Reframing the Future
 Australian National Training Authority (ANTA)
 Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST)