

## ***Examining decision-making about workforce development***

**An interview with Geof Hawke<sup>i</sup>  
Senior Research Fellow at the University of Technology, Sydney  
and leader of research activity 8**

**Interviewer:** *Decisions on allocating resources to PD are critical to the building of workforce capability in registered training organisations (RTOs). What has been your first step in researching this decision-making?*

**Geof Hawke:** Yes, planning and allocating for workforce development is important for any organisation. For an RTO, however, it is particularly significant as learning is their core business. This was why we decided to include an exploration of these issues in our consortium research program.

As with any research activity, we began with an exploration of what we already knew about these issues. In particular, we decided that we would seek to identify what was known about how organisations in general — not just RTOs — go about the process and to look to see if there were any useful hints or advice we might gain from international experience.

**Interviewer:** *To this point in your research, have you found any stand-out differences between Australian and international human resources (HR) decision-making?*

**Geof Hawke:** No, not really. It is clear that, like so much of our lives and work, HR practices in developing economies follow similar patterns. Sometimes these reflect a process of learning from others' experiences, but quite often it's a matter of following fads and trends without a great deal of thought.

In the HR literature, as well, there appears to be a great deal of descriptive reporting of "good ideas" or "new approaches" but not a great deal of systematic review or evaluation of them. As well, a lot of the literature exhorts practitioners to adopt a particular approach and argues why this new approach should be adopted but offers little real evidence for its value. In fact, it is striking that the HR field appears to be one that has not to any degree taken up the view that is widespread in many areas in favour of "evidence-based policy".

Interestingly, the literature — both here and internationally — is very sparse in terms of what it tells us about workforce development in RTOs. There are examples describing practice but it is only in the last few years that there has been any real look at the issues. Most of that literature is Australian and most of the studies have been carried out by researchers associated with this consortium.

One of the interesting differences between HR practices in RTOs in Australia and those overseas is the extent to which HR practices used in commercial enterprises have been adopted by RTOs. In Australia, the UK and parts of the USA, such models are now being commonly applied but in most of Europe, the models in use are more those traditionally used in the

public sector. There is clearly a real issue here for RTOs about what they see as their central purpose.

**Interviewer:** *Why do you plan to research both individual and organisational HR decision-making?*

**Geof Hawke:** We recognised from the beginning that almost everything that was written about decision-making for workforce development had focussed on the process from a management or organisational perspective. It was usually a top-down approach. However, this was the case at a time in history when there has been a great shift in emphasis from the collective to the individual.

It was clear to us that in order to really understand how workforce development could occur, it was important that we considered both the organisational and the individual perspectives.

At the moment, we know almost nothing about why individuals choose to participate in centrally organised development activities or why they do not. Why do some extensively invest in their own development, but others don't? These are things we need to learn more about.

**Interviewer:** *Do you expect there to be synergies or overlap with your research and other consortium research, such as research activity 6?*

**Geof Hawke:** The whole design of the consortium's research is interlinked. All of the questions we're trying to address are complex and multi-faceted. I'm expecting to gain insights into what I'm addressing from the work of most of my colleagues.

**Interviewer:** *How do you propose to encourage RTOs and individuals to benefit from your research?*

**Geof Hawke:** I'll be seeking assistance from RTOs to volunteer to participate in this study and will also be asking individuals within those RTOs to discuss with me their own experiences.

As well, though, I'm keen to hear from others who might have insights into the issues I'm exploring and I'll be especially keen to have reactions and comments from people throughout VET on the draft reports from this work that will be appearing on the web-site throughout the year.

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<sup>i</sup> **Geof Hawke** has been Senior Research Fellow in OVAL Research at the University of Technology, Sydney since 1995. Since joining UTS, he has managed a wide range of research projects and spoken and written widely on VET matters.

His professional experience in vocational education has ranged across work as diverse as TAFE vocational counsellor, researcher, manager and policy adviser. He had responsibilities for establishing assessment policy and practice in NSW TAFE colleges, and ran the NSW TAFE Commission's Industry Restructuring Taskforce where he represented NSW on many

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national policy bodies. Later he was the founding Chief Executive of the National Community Services and Health Industry Training Advisory Board.

His interests are in vocational education, training and employment, in particular the effective linkage between policy and practice; improving assessment practice; how work is changing and the implications of this for learning; the nature of learning in the workplace and its role within formal education and training systems; and the nature and role of institutions within education and training.

His publication list can be viewed at:

[http://www.education.uts.edu.au/ostaff/staff/geof\\_hawke.html](http://www.education.uts.edu.au/ostaff/staff/geof_hawke.html)