

Professor Roger Harris' article in *The Australian TAFE Teacher*, winter 2005 edition, Vol. 39/2

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## Opportunity to participate in VET research

**An exciting program of research is being undertaken by a consortium of high level researchers – *Supporting VET providers in building capability for the future*. It is a two-year program, funded by ANTA (soon DEST) and managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. ROGER HARRIS reports.**

The consortium is being directed by Roger Harris (Adelaide), Berwyn Clayton (Canberra) and Clive Chappell (Sydney). It comprises five other key researchers: Victor Callan, Geof Hawke, John Mitchell, Michele Simons and Andy Smith, as well as eight partner researchers. The team is multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral and has strong track records in VET research.

In the program there are nine research activities, seven involving research inquiries into 'hot' issues around building capability and the first and last as 'bookends' concerned more with process for the overall research program.

In Research Activity 1, we have been 'feeling the pulse' of a cross-section of those most closely involved in the sector, with the outcomes to inform the consortium's research work. We have interviewed 57 key stakeholders across the country, and held five forums in which 239 VET practitioners have participated. From these we have gained:

- clear confirmation of the importance of the consortium's research activities;
- knowledge of initiatives that participants believe are significant in their jurisdiction;
- alerts to any specific contextual matters in each location;
- research areas seen by interviewees to be of interest;
- suggestions for contacts and communications – including details on upcoming conferences, workshops, forums and other activities, and many invitations to present on the consortium's work as it progresses;
- understanding of their views on how imperatives and challenges are likely to impact on training providers in the next three to five years.

Our attention has been drawn to many interesting developments going on around Australia. As the *Enhancing the capability of VET professionals* (2004) claimed last year,

*[t]here is already much innovation and good practice in workforce development across the VET sector and a growing body of knowledge and experience about excellence in professional and vocational learning ... the challenge is both to build on this knowledge and experience and to share it across jurisdictions and among registered training organisations and VET professionals. (p.14)*

We see the Consortium's task as both *building* and *sharing* as we extend beyond the work of the above report. To that end, Research Activity 9 is devoted to diffusion, integration and change management. It will involve researchers, in collaboration with associate researchers within providers, conducting forums in selected regions to disseminate key messages from the consortium's work and to seek feedback on its products.

**'...developing people, developing cultures and developing practices.'**

The other seven research activities are covering the topical issues of:

- understanding career pathways in VET;
- analysing critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment;
- assessing the impact of cultures and structures on individual and organisational capability;
- investigating learning through work;
- examining human resource practices for a changing environment;
- investigating approaches for sustaining and building educational leadership;
- examining decision-making about workforce development.

Each research activity has a team of four researchers so as to promote cross-fertilisation of ideas across the topics. In this way, an *integrated program* of research can be built, as distinct from nine discrete projects.

The website will progressively be built with products from these activities. These will include: tools such as professional development support kits, models of good practice in change management which can be tailored to suit different needs, and useful insights into the VET workforce, its cultures and practices.

The researchers recognise that a single, homogeneous approach to developing the capability of training providers is neither possible nor desirable in the highly-diversified Australian context. Our program will focus on three areas of development that together help to build organisational capability: developing people, developing cultures and developing practices. The core approach is to work actively with training partners and stakeholders to identify, evaluate and implement sustainable, creative and innovative approaches to capacity building. These approaches will then be widely shared across the sector and used as inputs for more long-term policy development by governments, industries, Skills Councils and other agencies.

*Roger Harris is professor of adult and vocational education at the University of SA, an executive committee member of AVETRA and editor of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning. He is Director of the research consortium.*

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