

Learning collaborations between ACE  
and vocational education and training  
providers: Good practice partnerships

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVET

## Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Learning collaborations between ACE and vocational education and training providers: Good practice partnerships—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1708.html>>.

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The author/project team was funded to undertake this research via a grant under the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program. These grants are awarded to organisations through a competitive process, in which NCVER does not participate.

The NVETRE program is coordinated and managed by NCVER on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through Department of Education, Science and Training. This program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector. For further information about the program go to the NCVER website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

ISBN 1 921170 54 9 print edition

ISBN 1 921170 60 3 web edition

TD/TNC 87.08

Published by NCVER

ABN 87 007 967 311

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<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1708.html>

# Foreword

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This research was undertaken under the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation Program, a national research program managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments.

The project was in response to the national research priority of the role of vocational education and training (VET) in building economic and social capital in regions and communities. Several key streams of work have been identified in relation to this objective, including regional segmentation, indicators and performance measures, and partnerships, with this research addressing the latter stream.

Vocational education and training is particularly important in regional areas, with participation at a higher rate than in metropolitan areas. Adult and community education (ACE) plays a vital role providing opportunities for people to connect and reconnect with learning at all stages of their lives, to acquire new knowledge and skills and to become more involved in their community.

This study seeks and found support for the proposition that partnerships between ACE and VET are effective in further promoting vocational learning, broadening community capacity and increasing lifelong learning skills within a community.

The report is directed at policy-makers concerned with regional development and those who are in the business of provision of VET and ACE in regional areas. The 'good practice guide' for successful ACE–VET partnerships (available at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1717.html>>) is likely to be particularly useful.

Tom Karmel  
Managing Director, NCVER

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Readers interested in the topic of vocational education and training in regional and rural Australia are pointed to a number of other projects in this area.

- ✧ Stimson, R, Baum, S, Mangan, J, Gellecum, Y, Shyy, T & Yigitcanlar, T 2004, *Analysing spatial patterns in the characteristics of work, employment and skills in Australia's capital cities and across its regional cities and towns: Modelling community opportunity and vulnerability*, University of Queensland, Brisbane.
- ✧ Billett, S, Clemans, A & Seddon, T 2005, *Forming, developing and sustaining social partnerships*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- ✧ Allison, J, Gorringer, S & Lacey, J 2006, *Building learning communities: Partnerships, social capital and vocational education and training performance*, NCVER, Adelaide.

- ✧ Waterhouse, P, Virgona, C & Brown, R 2006, *Creating synergies: Local government facilitating learning and development through partnerships*, NCVET, Adelaide.
- ✧ Stokes, H, Stacey, K & Lake, M 2006, *Schools, vocational education and training and partnerships: Capacity-building in rural and regional communities*, NCVET, Adelaide.

To find other material of interest, search VOCED (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <<http://www.voced.edu.au>>) using the following keywords: learning communities, adult and community education, partnerships, VET performance, regional development.

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# Contents

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Acknowledgements	6
Key messages	7
Executive summary	8
Context and purpose	8
Scope	8
Key findings for partnership directions	8
Limitations	10
Context	11
Research purpose and statement	11
Reviewing the relevant literature	11
Methodology	21
The research questions	21
Design of the research	21
Organisations canvassed and partnerships identified	21
The interviews	22
Partner sites	23
Findings from the telephone interviews	24
1 Information about the examples of partnerships and collaborations	24
2 Outcomes identified by partnership personnel	27
3 Good (and not so good) practices	29
The site visits	32
Regional New South Wales	32
Regional/rural Victoria	33
Regional/urban South Australia	34
Regional Tasmania	35
Urban Melbourne	36
Urban Adelaide	37
Summary and implications of the research findings for policy, practice and research	39
References	40
Support document details	42

# Acknowledgements

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The authors acknowledge the valuable assistance of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

We also sincerely thank all the adult and community education (ACE) and vocational education and training (VET) personnel who, as self-selecting participants, gave up valuable time to provide their knowledge, insight and reflections about their experience of being involved in partnerships or collaborations. Our findings are enriched by their responses, stories and good humour.

Finally, our sincere appreciation to Julian Moore for his oversight of administrative issues within the project as well as his time spent on the telephone and long distance travelling to undertake some of the onsite interviews.



# Key messages

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This study examines partnerships and collaborations between the adult and community education (ACE) and vocational education and training (VET) sectors in Australia, where organisations come together initially to expedite delivery of courses to vocational students. The research is aimed at identifying those good practices which support and promote both formal and informal partnerships and how such practices, in turn, benefit the communities in which they operate. The key messages arising from the research follow.

- ✧ Successful partnerships are highly dependent on having lead personnel based in each of the collaborating organisations who are strongly committed to the partnership effort. A key factor of the partnership's success is the length of time it exists. The longer a partnership has been operating, the more committed its personnel become to continuing the collaboration.
- ✧ The development phase is a particularly crucial time; those partnerships that fail appear to do so within the first two years. Partnerships also fail because of misunderstandings between organisations about the aims and objectives each has for the collaboration, and the expectations about what students involved can achieve.
- ✧ A key factor in promoting positive relationships between organisations in a partnership is maintaining respect both for each other and the varied stakeholders involved.
- ✧ Good communication, shared understanding of goals and the ability to be flexible in relation to both teaching and administrative aspects are among the most crucial aspects of good practice in successful partnerships or collaborations between ACE and VET.

# Executive summary

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## Context and purpose

Adult and community education (ACE) and vocational education and training (VET) organisations operate effectively within their own sectors to deliver vocational learning at various levels to their students and clients. A number of these organisations are currently working with one another in either formal or informal partnerships to provide a range of courses to clients in both urban and regional settings. The purpose of this research is to investigate the types of good practices that collaborating participants see as both supporting and promoting their partnerships. The study also aims to identify practices which may be counter-productive to the long-term survival of a partnership or collaboration. At the same time, the study examines the ways in which the communities involved in such collaborations are benefiting as a result of them.

This research has resulted in a definitive good practice guide which offers constructive and practical information for organisations and practitioners seeking to repeat these collaborations elsewhere, whether on an informal or formal basis. The research used interviews and site visits to identify key factors and these are set out in *Creating effective ACE and VET partnerships: Good practice guide*, available at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1717.html>>.

## Scope

The investigation was conducted through a series of telephone interviews and follow-up site visits. In fact, 26 organisations from ACE and VET who are or were involved in partnerships answered a number of questions about their practices and the subsequent outcomes. The telephone interviews were conducted with three partnerships in regional New South Wales, one in regional Queensland, one in urban Western Australia, four across both urban and regional South Australia, two in Tasmania and one in urban and one in regional Victoria.

Further findings came from six partner site visits made by researchers. The site visits were a regional community centre and their partnered regional technical and further education (TAFE) institute in New South Wales, a rural community centre and partner regional TAFE in Victoria, and an urban community centre partnered with a regional TAFE institute in South Australia. In Tasmania we visited a regional suburban community centre and their regional TAFE partner, in Melbourne an urban ACE centre and partner city university, and in Adelaide we visited an urban community centre partnered with an outer urban TAFE.

## Key findings for partnership directions

This research has found evidence to support the proposition that partnerships and collaborations between ACE and VET can promote vocational learning, broaden community capacity and increase lifelong learning skills within a community. This strengthened community environment

results from the sharing of knowledge, skills and interests across the range of stakeholders who come together within the collaborative effort of the partnership.

A number of key good practices that underpin successful partnerships were identified, as well as some practices that negatively affect such partnerships. Good communication, shared understanding of goals and the ability to be flexible in relation to both teaching and administration were among the most crucial factors of good practice. For a partnership to succeed, lead personnel were needed within both partnered organisations who were committed to taking the ideas forward beyond the initial stages. Successful partnerships also seemed to be, in general, highly dependent on those lead personnel involved having either instigated the original idea, or being involved in the early discussions and preparations for the partnership. In this context, we also found that partnerships and collaborations benefit in the long term from some form of clearly enunciated, written model of action and requirements at the outset. Such a model should also include a succession plan for when lead personnel move on.

We found that partnerships generally take years, rather than months, to become fully viable and enduring. Again, the lead personnel are a driving force in that viability. Time is also a central factor in allowing the partnership to fully develop, and enable all stakeholders to settle into the relationship. The opportunity to interview personnel in short-term partnerships was limited, but among those interviewed were personnel whose partnership had been unsuccessful. The partnerships deemed successful (those that have been in existence for at least two years or longer) tended to nominate themselves for interviews.

The research also noted that having respect for one another and the various stakeholders in each partnership plays a key role in continuing positive relationships between organisational personnel, whether administrative or teaching staff. Time also played an important part in building this sense of respect. In addition, the research found that partnerships and collaborations were in fact *the means* by which respect and acknowledgement of others' capabilities and skills could be engendered in situations where organisations had previously been unaware of the skills each could offer.

In successful partnerships, organisations often have quite differing views of what constitutes outcomes for students, but through their collaborative relationship they are able to accommodate these disparate ideas. For example, when comparing the data between partners, ACE personnel indicated that they place more importance on intrinsic community benefits and their ability to help disadvantaged learners where such opportunities have arisen from successful collaborative efforts. On the other hand, VET personnel place greater emphasis on numbers of completions and learners articulating into TAFE as a successful outcome. Such differing emphases would superficially seem to indicate that these views arise from incompatible ideological outlooks towards learning, its delivery and therefore its outcomes. However, despite these apparent differences, we found that personnel from both ACE and VET gave similar indications regarding the importance of providing beneficial outcomes for students, the community, and raising their own organisation's profile to attract new business.

This research identified a number of factors which partnership personnel see as working against a sound partnership. A lack of knowledge about each other's operations—including organisational abilities, teaching styles, skill levels and student cohort—can cause initial concern for both sides of a partnership during the development stages. Although the successful partnerships are able to work through their differences in outlook, in some cases interviewees found that these concerns were not addressed well enough to ensure the continuity of a partnership. We were advised of cases where unrealistic goals had been set for both learners and educators, which had doomed the partnership to failure. Similarly, the respondents suggested that competition for students and resources had led to disagreements, as had inadequate staffing or educators who were not fully aware of the necessities of working cooperatively with other organisations. The fact that each

organisation had different administrative requirements also impacted negatively on stakeholder attitudes and, in turn, on partnership operations. The difficulty of working within the two different bureaucracies and two types of teaching organisations was also noted as problematic. Although successful partnerships have managed to overcome these differences, they remain a challenge for all practitioners and administrators.

## Limitations

The primary data for these research findings arise from interviews collected from participant organisations which chose to take part. As a consequence, results are not necessarily conclusive for all ACE–VET organisations involved in partnerships or collaborations.

## Research purpose and statement

This report provides further understanding into the processes and outcomes of partnerships and collaborations between adult and community education (ACE) and vocational education and training (VET) organisations. These partnerships enhance connections between the sectors, so as to increase lifelong learning, community capacity-building and industry skill needs in communities and regions. This project did not plan for the provision of quantitative data. Rather, it investigated and identified in qualitative terms both the positive and negative features seen to engender or hinder the building of cooperation and collaboration in ACE–VET partnerships among a number of organisations across Australia. Further, the report analysed the outcomes of such partnerships as perceived by their various stakeholders.

This investigation will therefore be able to inform policy, practice and research by providing suggestions for good practice and an analysis of outcomes which can further develop fundamental connections between ACE and VET in communities across outer urban, regional and rural localities. To this end, a ‘good practice guide’ is available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1717.html>.

## Reviewing the relevant literature

### Introduction

The brief review of literature presented here is intended as a consolidation of evidence from previous, current and ongoing research to examine the concept of partnerships and collaborations between ACE and VET and other sectors, using differing approaches and at various levels. In the first section, the review discusses how partnerships and collaborations are seen to be engendering outcomes of lifelong learning, social capital and economic benefit to their communities, as well as how some of these benefits might be identified. The second section takes a different approach by briefly investigating the ways in which previous partnerships and connections have been or can be auspiced by organisations or individuals to promote or support collaborations. In the final section, the literature is examined to identify which characteristics of good practice underpin successful partnerships and collaborations. It is important to note that the participating localities interviewed for the study may not be fully representative of all partnerships or collaborations. As a result, the literature data will be collated into a table of good practice indicators as a benchmark against which our selected sites can be qualitatively compared. It should also be noted that while our research report overall is focused on the partnerships and connections between ACE and VET, there is a body of evidence from other sectors also considered relevant to an understanding of how such collaborations might work, which is included in this review.

## Outcomes and benefits from partnerships and collaborations

In terms of regional development and community capacity-building through relationships, Falk and contributors (2001) analyse practical models and initiatives adopted by communities in both Australia and overseas as models for community development. Their findings show that the building of relationships is seen as ‘the essence of social capital, while learning is its currency’ (p.233). Kearns (2004a, pp.17–18) similarly suggests that the building and linking of networks enhances social capacity and therefore contributes to sustainability which, in turn, leads to capacity for innovation and economic development in communities. For Kilpatrick (2003a, p.2), ‘learning is related to both the use and formation of social capital’. New knowledge and enhanced social capital provided by learning interaction then becomes ‘a powerful tool’ to help communities and business organisations address and manage change by working as a community. Kilpatrick illustrates her claims by examples from regional Australia where partnerships and/or collaborations formed networks between VET, industry and local communities. These networks then develop learning communities which enjoy enhanced social and economic capital and lifelong learning.

Partnerships in urban areas are also the means of creating a community which learns about itself through understanding how to respond to pressing local issues, ‘establishing new partnerships and shaping its own future’ (Melville 2003, p.2). Interestingly, this response is also what Newman (2000) has called ‘learning for social action’, where communities form to address issues which are beyond the scope of individuals acting on their own. Nashashibi (2004) also relates the relationships between programs in United Kingdom communities as being a key factor in promoting learning:

Where there are strong progression links within and between provision it becomes easier to help learners making their journey transform what might seem like random accumulation into a powerful agent for change. (Nashashibi 2004, p.12)

Balatti and Falk (2000, p.3) take this concept into the ACE–VET sectors by suggesting that ‘the quality of interconnections [in VET] is dependent upon the quality of the interactions’. The authors offer a working definition of community capacity as ‘the community’s ability to plan for and meet its social and economic needs in pursuit of a quality of life that is acceptable to its members and to the larger community region, state and country’. They also argue that the way in which vocational education and training is incorporated into the overall capacity of a community, through a common purpose, will often determine how the community achieves its goals (2000, p.6).

The concept of a common purpose can also be seen in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD) definition of social capital cited by Kearns (2004b) as ‘networks together with shared norms, values and understanding, that facilitate cooperation within and among groups’ (p.i). Kearns also believes that social capital involves networks with the following aims:

- ✧ to link people in communities for joint action
- ✧ to provide norms and values with which everyone concurs
- ✧ to promote the significance of shared norms and values in culture of community.

The development of employability skills for individuals who are part of a community also contributes to building social capital. It is here that vocational education and training is suggested as making its greatest contribution—both as an organisation and as part of a partnership—because it can be more responsive to community, social and cultural needs. Kearns (2004b, p.17) offers a number of examples where this contribution is apparent, suggesting also that ‘learning communities’ (specifically about partnerships and usually involving VET) are ‘powerful instruments for building social capital’ (p.18), and in terms of information and communication

technology development in communities, partnership activities play a crucial role in building community networks around technology (p.20).

In the regional areas, partnerships are seen to be a crucial factor in further developing the type of VET activities that facilitate a community learning environment, thus enabling a wider share of the community to engage in learning activities (Allison, Gorringer & Lacey 2006). The authors found that a variety of (mostly) VET/industry partnerships generated 'considerable trust, collaboration and shared goals and objectives, all of which translate to social capital' (p.30). The partnerships also promoted innovation, creativity, community and civic engagement in the areas in which they took place. Regional communities benefit from partnerships between schools and vocational education and training, as found by Stokes, Stacey & Lake (2006). While partnership models differ from school to school and region to region, the authors note a number of shared issues which are beneficial to their communities. These issues include:

- ✧ local areas retain young people, who also gain work skills with accreditation
- ✧ local areas gain work-ready people to fill skill shortages
- ✧ local businesses can support the young people in their area with jobs
- ✧ young people gain access to networks (Stokes, Stacey & Lake 2006).

The view of outcomes from partnerships is also undergoing change as the 'current advocacy for lifelong learning is driven more by economic and technological imperatives' (Morris 2001 in Hawke, Kimberley and Melville 2001) than by the cultural and personal development objectives favoured in the past. In their research, Hawke, Kimberley and Melville (2001) found indications of change, and believe that positive attitudes towards lifelong learning in communities are largely the result of a wider understanding about vocational education and training, which the communities often perceived as being about learning for employment. Thus, it is suggested that lifelong learning and associated benefits are more likely to occur in communities where a range of partnerships between VET and other organisations can be identified as the 'value adding' in economic development (p.4). Clemans, Hartley and Macrae (2003) support this view and show how partnerships between ACE and various other sectors prepare people for particular occupations which lead to both individual employment outcomes and the micro-economic development of local businesses in the community.

Interestingly, one of the key roles in a partnership suggested by Kearns (2004b, p.6) is that of trust, which is seen as both a source and outcome of social capital. As will be discussed in a later section, trust is also noted as one of the characteristics defining good practice in partnerships and collaborations. Falk (2000) also mentions trust, specifically in relation to the structure of partnerships. He defines these as the horizontal relationships, that are trust-based networks, 'focussed on common and shared needs and values that equate to the social capital that enhances economic outcomes' (p.2). Partnerships result in community leadership which, Falk argues, facilitates the essential ingredients of resilient and sustainable social and economic outcomes for communities and individuals. There are a number of positive outcomes identified by Falk as being directly related to a sound partnership, and to follow are some of the positive outcomes which he believes build capacity:

- ✧ maintaining an ongoing collaborative relationship between partners
- ✧ identifying coherent and locally relevant employment opportunities
- ✧ value-adding components that contribute to community wellbeing
- ✧ changing attitudes in participants that promote transfer of learning and community linkages
- ✧ improving lifestyles of participants.

Such outcomes are indicative of what could be termed a circularity or cyclical effect. Malley (2003) supports this idea by arguing that good partnerships work towards the creation of learning communities. In turn, these increase social capital, which then promotes lifelong learning, and is followed by community capacity-building. This last outcome encourages the community to seek better partnerships, and so the cycle goes on. Brown (2003) relates how partnerships between organisations add to the building of learning communities. However, while some groupings of learning providers and community facilities offer various means by which residents can participate in both formal and informal learning, such a group does not necessarily constitute a learning community. He cites Landry and Matarasso (1998), who suggest that learning communities develop by learning from their experiences and those of others (Brown 2003, p.21). Thus, partnerships engender the social capital provided by learning communities, as well as enabling individual organisations to extend the continuity of learning opportunities and social inclusion within a community.

A number of specific benefits are identified as resulting from the partnerships and collaborations that occur through this cycle. For example, Kilpatrick (2003b) proposes that a collaboration is beneficial in that it ‘enhances the coordination effect’ which ‘leads to ties between groups, helps overcome problems of isolation, specialisation of economies and a relative lack of human and financial resources’ (p.1) and thus builds social capital and community capacity. Kearns (2004b, p.7) also clearly defines the social capital benefits as:

- ✧ combating exclusion, building inclusivity
- ✧ providing economic benefits
- ✧ enhancing quality of life for participants
- ✧ supporting lifelong learning
- ✧ helping communities adapt to change.

Selby Smith et al. (2002) also argue for partnerships as a way of benefiting communities through promoting support for more individuals and groups to extend lifelong learning opportunities. Likewise, Rose and Schooneveldt (2005) show that partnerships between ACE–VET enable ACE to widen its ‘repertoire’ and deliver courses that create pathways to employment programs which then better meet the needs of their community (p.19). Partnerships, the authors suggest, are collaborations that provide ‘learning to learn’ bridges enabling individuals eventually to take up TAFE. Similarly, McKenna (2004, p.11) proposes that ‘once alliances are established in one area, opportunities for exploring various other activities or interests are opened up’.

Partnerships also promote inclusion of those on the margins of the mainstream, such as early school leavers and disadvantaged groups (Kearns 2004b; Daniel, Mitchell & Shearwood 2001), who do not have the same access to learning opportunities as other groups. Selby Smith et al. (2002) cite the example of a community where lifelong learning was not a priority for the region and the community had difficulty in establishing programs. When funding from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) helped them to develop a learning community model, they found that partnerships between TAFE, employers and other organisations improved outcomes specifically for disadvantaged individuals and groups. These authors also cite partnerships between industry and unions that encourage workers to undertake more training and move into better paid positions. This partnership benefits both individuals and the company as well as the wider community by engendering changes in attitude towards learning (Selby Smith et al. 2002, p.78).

Daniel, Mitchell and Shearwood ((2001) cite a partnership in Western Australia which encourages the development of a learning society by promoting lifelong learning among disadvantaged groups who do not have the same access to educational opportunities that others have. Such a partnership widens the market for ACE programs by making more effective use of limited



funding and means that participants gain greater access to services and increase their experience of community development. In addition, it provides links to knowledge about learning in general as well as more specific issues such as transport and counselling, which the authors suggest are often ignored.

It is not possible to calculate direct economic benefits in dollar terms arising from ACE–VET partnerships. However, in their estimate of economic benefits flowing to the community as a whole from ACE, Birch et al. (2003) estimate a figure of somewhere between A\$2 billion and A\$6 billion as the net economic impact, give or take a number of assumptions about government taxes on income and other revenues. While partnerships are not specifically defined in the authors' qualitative and quantitative data, some costing relates to ACE students going on to other qualifications and work through significant collaboration between TAFE and industry. Other, more indirect economic benefits for communities are cited by Kingma & Falk (2000) where the authors argue that the change in economic and social structures resulting from globalisation of systems and institutions can dis-empower marginalised communities. Hence, such new institutional settings need different learning settings, and the 'successful communities are those which learn and in the process create the social capital necessary to underpin a learning society' (Kingma & Falk 2000, p.233). This learning also translates into a market-based economy for a community. The authors further suggest that the integration of 'formal, non-formal and informal kinds of learning will achieve ... a stronger, responsive and proactive regional socio-economy for Australia' (p.234).

## How are partnerships best auspiced?

In the context of this research, the term 'auspiced' is used to refer to the way in which partnerships and/or collaborations and connections are both supported and driven by one or more parties of a partnership, or associated with a community in which it occurs. A number of examples are given below. It should be noted, however, that as Bateman and Clayton (2002, p.10) suggest, the term can also be commonly understood to refer to the actual alliance, rather than its driving force.

Daniel, Mitchell and Shearwood (2001) have a number of ideas regarding how to support partnerships and collaborations, suggesting that these can best be auspiced by participants having a clear idea of a process model by which the partnership can operate. The following points indicate the way in which such a process model would operate:

- ✧ identify community need
- ✧ liaise with relevant member organisations
- ✧ establish community process and key people
- ✧ define target group and develop project/partnership aims, outcomes, etc.
- ✧ negotiate rules
- ✧ identify issues or need for specialist help
- ✧ identify resources
- ✧ acquire resources
- ✧ establish a management team.

Saunders (2001) adds that greater provision of information in a formal manner to coordinators, the sharing of resources and effective communication between sector personnel will better auspice partnerships.

Waterhouse, Virgona and Brown (2006) examined four case study sites where the Victorian Local Government Association plays a key role in supporting and auspicing the development of 'learning communities' across both regional and urban Victoria. This study found that 'stewardship'—in this case of the Victorian Local Government Association—was a crucial factor in the management of cross-sectoral partnerships in the various communities. Their findings were that identifying, appreciating and proactively managing the interfaces between players was critical to a partnership's success, especially as there were at times subtle, but significant, differences in values, perceptions and 'world views' held by the stakeholders. These differences might also affect understanding about desired outcomes from the collaborative processes. The researchers refer to the management of relationships between partners as cultural interaction along 'tribal' lines. The developmental work between these 'tribes' calls for 'new forms of professional practice [that] means working in new ways and in different spaces where pathways are ill-defined' (Waterhouse, Virgona & Brown 2006, p.7).

Other authors who have examined a number of differing partnerships do not seem to have such clear ideas about the way in which collaborations are best auspiced. However, those who do discuss the matter point out various types of organisational collaboration and the level at which they are supported. For example, Kearns (2004a) cites the collaboration between the Hume Council, local TAFE, the ACE organisation and other community organisations that created Hume Global Learning Village. In this example, the Hume Council in New South Wales has successfully auspiced the partnership by initiating a community development department. The council identified staff likely to benefit the engagement and put them into the department to 'better leverage learning outcomes from these trusted professionals in the community' (p.32).

Another example is that of the Victorian Government's initiative 'Community Learning Partnerships', which encourages and supports a number of ACE organisations themselves to auspice partnerships. These partnerships are generally between government and community and occur through the development of working arrangements that aim to bring self-sustainability in skills development (Kearns 2004a, p.34). As well as ACE partnerships, the Victorian Government's VET in Schools programs provide an example of how partnerships are auspiced through provision of an information and resources website that provides partners with development strategies between schools and registered training organisations (Bateman & Clayton 2002). This online initiative also offers sample memoranda of understanding, and Bateman and Clayton suggest that formal partnerships among registered training organisations are best auspiced through such processes because they provide compliance requirements and agreements on responsibilities.

In other states there are various other effective forms of arrangements, some auspiced with agreements backed by operations manuals for staff, as in South Australia, or sets of guidelines as in Western Australia (Bateman & Clayton 2002, p.15). At the same time, not everyone sees government as the most auspicious sector for driving successful partnerships. In an overseas study from Ireland, for example, Fleming (2004) argues that 'both the top-down of government/state and the bottom-up of local development' could be re-structured better to coordinate their efforts, resources and tasks (p.14). Fleming's concern is that the state often supports a vision of lifelong learning and adult education only in terms of its economic ideals, and that social inclusion and equality are merely rhetoric underpinned by economic intent (p.15).

This issue is echoed by Seddon, Billett and Vongalis (2002) and Billett, Clemons and Seddon (2005), who argue that social partnerships between various sectors delivering VET—and the organisations which represent them within communities—build capacity and capability in that community. However, they do warn that partnerships could become problematic should their formation be imposed by outside agencies, such as top-down government control (Seddon, Billett & Vongalis 2002, p.77). The authors suggest that the particular ways in which partnerships are auspiced—that is, how 'social partnerships are granted patronage in their communities and how

individuals work to engage with these partnerships’ (p.78)—are at the heart of the success or failure to build sustainable community capacity. Billett, Clemans and Seddon also found that a wholly top-down approach would jeopardise the very goals government was seeking to achieve, because it ignored the important pivotal role played by volunteers who are not ‘captive to government priorities’ (Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005, p.19).

Rose and Schooneveldt (2005) also comment on individual engagement, adding that it is important to have skilled, confident practitioners who understand how to auspice partnerships. Plane (2005) proposes that to attain successful outcomes, it is imperative that individuals understand the ‘complex, kaleidoscopic dynamics of the economic climate in which stakeholders operate, and enablers and barriers to the learning partnerships process occur’ (p.2). However, as Dhillon (2005) shows, partnerships can also form and continue successfully even though participants openly begin their collaboration in a pragmatic manner. Dhillon’s study reveals how a long-term and highly diverse partnership between a number of organisations in the UK Midlands has successfully progressed from trying to access funding as a group, to a stronger and deeper commitment to the partnership as a ‘social glue’ for the communities involved. As the partnership grew, participants moved from a position of ‘hostile competition’ (p.216) to a better understanding of each other’s operations, and how to make their relationships succeed so that they could work effectively with each other.

Such operational dynamics are also part of Saunders’ (2001) suggestion that linkages or partnerships between ACE and VET could be better auspiced by improving each sector’s mainstream knowledge of the other. Issues such as each partner being fully aware of the services offered in the partner organisation, the types of training given, the types of courses available to clients and the ways in which credit transfer operates in each sector, would benefit both the students and the collaborating partners.

The Tasmanian Department of Education (2003) shows that partnerships are auspiced more successfully through bringing together a wide range of sectors that represent stakeholders. They cite the involvement of education sectors, information sources, business and industry, government and the wider community as being crucial to the success of the collaboration. Such widespread involvement in provision is seen to promote service delivery, enable greater individual access, and foster equitable opportunities and outcomes. This collaborative method of auspicing the partnerships is also viewed as enhancing social capital by contributing to ‘broader community driven goals and priorities’ (2003, p.9). The authors cite the benefits that arise from involvement in partnerships as being important in:

- ✧ building capacity for participants in other networks or clusters
- ✧ stimulating a range of community projects that enable the pooling, and coordination, of funds
- ✧ promoting the recognition of local industry
- ✧ creating cultures that value learning.

Such findings are similar to those noted by NCVET (2003, p.9) regarding the benefits from collaborations in workplace learning, where the authors suggest that facilitated training occurs more strongly when networks, partnerships and supply chains are integrated. They use the examples of e-learning, community and whole-of-government approaches that bring potential benefit to enterprise, individual and the community. Seddon (2004) concurs, arguing that the networks auspiced in adult education ‘appear to be the linchpin in processes of coordination and governance ... they are critical to the operation of both hierarchy and markets’ (p.16).

## Characteristics of good practice in partnerships and collaborations

There is a high level of agreement among authors as to the main characteristics of good practice in partnerships and collaborations across and among various sectors, such as schools, ACE, TAFE, industry, registered training organisations and government. The main agreed characteristics are presented in box 1 (page 20), and are used as a form of benchmarking or counter-balance against which our selected sites can be qualitatively compared. As well as the good practice characteristics, in general there is agreement that partnerships work better if placed within the context of local possibilities and constraints (Chappell 2003; Callan 2004) and that good practice means finding 'situated solutions to specific local and regional education and training needs' (Chappell 2003, p.18). Daniel, Mitchell and Shearwood (2001) propose that collaborative ventures are seen to work best 'when the partners are able to find "common ground" rather than focussing on differences' (p.6) and they focus on their 'respective strengths and work together to explore a range of opportunities that benefit both' (p.4).

Billett, Clemons and Seddon (2005) suggest that when people explore and undertake opportunities together they are actually doing 'partnership work'. They describe this as 'the interactive and collaborative process of working together to identify, negotiate and articulate goals, and to develop processes for realising and reviewing those goals' (2005, p.22). The authors identify a range of processes which enable the partners to do this work together; we suggest that such enabling might also be characterised as 'good practice'. Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006) found that customising the partnership model to create what they call a 'community fit' (p.9) provides stronger outcomes and smoother progress for the partnerships. In the case of their research, these partnerships were between schools and VET in rural and regional communities. Because these smaller communities have specialised needs for their VET programs, developing a strong sense of local ownership as well as high levels of community participation was particularly effective in helping to maintain a shared purpose.

Saunders (2001) undertook research specifically identifying a number of collaborations occurring between ACE and VET. It is notable for our study that Saunders' research found that regional areas in particular provide more incentives for collaboration than for competition. Examples of regional collaboration range from cross-organisational use of library facilities, to situations where organisations share buildings or staff teach across different sectors. This last factor is also identified by others (Marsh & MacDonald 2002) as a positive way of both encouraging students to gain and access pathways to further education and training, and reducing the chance students on the periphery have of 'slipping through the net'. Saunders suggests that informal connections often lead to better understanding and collaborations between the participants. Such connections include TAFE distributing ACE brochures to distribute to students, a cross-organisational use of college library facilities, and ACE staff acting on interview panels for TAFE. Also cited is a TAFE lecturer visiting ACE centres to offer introductory talks to students and ACE volunteers about TAFE courses (Saunders 2001, p.74). There are also cooperations in language and literacy services, with referrals across sectors seen as a form of positive collaboration (p.76). In addition, Saunders suggests that regular dialogue between organisations regarding each other's directions and ideas is particularly helpful to participants.

Throughout all the literature, there is a strong concept of 'regular dialogue'—or what others term 'effective communication' (Elmuti, Abebe & Nicolosi 2005; Bateman & Clayton 2002)—as a good practice characteristic. It is, however, often described in differing ways, such as 'mutual understanding' (Bateman & Clayton 2002), 'information exchange, or sharing of information' (Saunders 2001; Callan 2004) and 'regular interaction' (Marsh & MacDonald 2002). From her research into sustainable learning partnerships among businesses in a regional area, Plane (2005) notes that a 'willingness to listen' is one of the basic aspects of the collaboration seen to engender capacity-building in that locality.

There is, however, a cautionary note provided about the dialogue which occurs within partnerships and collaborations, with some authors suggesting there are negatives that can work against partnerships. Examples include a lack of awareness about each others' sector programs, a lack of consistency in credit decisions, differences in awarding recognition of prior learning, and a lack of understanding about available pathways (Saunders 2001, p.67). Saunders notes that competition for students (and possibly funding) is also an issue, although research respondents agreed that courses should be complementary rather than competitive (p.71). Kilpatrick (2003a) also provides some negatives which can work against partnerships; for example, small communities which lack groups or individuals with enough time to devote, the battle of competition in 'thin' markets with limited potential for growth, and insufficient continuity of programs. This can result in wasted resources and difficulty for participants when trying to keep up with wider changes, resulting in diminished enthusiasm (p.19). Likewise, Balatti and Falk (2000, p.13) note that barriers to effective partnerships and collaborations include:

- ✧ lack of social cohesion and trust
- ✧ lack of appropriate leadership
- ✧ presence of competition when a collaboration approach would prove more productive
- ✧ inadequate knowledge and skill base in communities of practice
- ✧ duplication of services
- ✧ under-utilised resources.

In terms of impediments that affect outcomes and outputs, Allison and colleagues (2006) similarly identify a number of institutional barriers which can impact on partnerships and their functionality. They also found that training packages need to be more flexible so as to better respond to local conditions and needs, and that institutional requirements can stifle innovation (p.32). These authors point to how differences between the needs of large and small businesses had, at times, become an impediment to effective partnership outcomes. Given this, it is useful to reflect on whether such differences between the scale of VET and ACE might also impact on how their partnership needs may differ.

In relation to the research being undertaken for this report, we acknowledge that our participating localities may not be fully representational of all partnerships or collaborations. As a consequence, these indicators have been collapsed into a framework (box 1). This shows that there is much common ground between localities which provide an effective framework for understanding good practice in developing and sustaining partnerships between ACE and VET, and how benefits and outcomes may occur. As an additional resource, a full source listing of the indicators by author is provided in the online support document which can be found at NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1708.html>>.

The issues identified from this brief overview of the literature, along with the good practice characteristics outlined in box 1, formed the basis around which the method of data collection was shaped. The following section provides a summary of the research questions which directed our research and a summary of the design of that research methodology.

## Box 1: Framework of good practice characteristics and indicators from literature

### *Good practice characteristic/indicators when planning*

Define goals and set a time-frame  
Recognise reasons for adopting a partnership model  
\*\*Research local needs and develop concrete plans  
Use community and regional focus as a driver  
Investigate relevance of needs in partnership areas  
\*\*Have an agreed set of goals and consider potential conflicts of interest  
Ensure partnership concept is accepted by all involved  
Carefully select partners based on common interests  
Provide incentives for collaborations

### *Good practice characteristic/indicators when setting up the structure*

Set up a memorandum of understanding  
Establish financial procedures and budgeting  
Recruit and select project workers at outset  
Implement systems for exchange, meetings, workshops, etc.  
Provide regular updates to participants  
Develop a cohesive vision, have a shared purpose  
\*\*Establish a conflict resolution process; have inclusive practices clearly defined  
Provide area for re-assessment of needs and resources

### *Good practice characteristics/indicators applying to personnel involved in partnerships*

Appoint designated linkage personnel  
\*\*Establish personal relationships; have good working relations  
\*\*Make cooperation a key; be prepared to work in new ways  
Appoint a coordinator  
Ensure community leadership is available or effective and respected coordinators  
Establish trust between key participants  
Check on acceptance of partnership linkages by all/both parties  
Use staff with knowledge/experience of sectors involved  
\*\*Respect each others' aims and vision; be willing to accept differing organisational cultures

### *Good practice characteristics/indicators relating to use of resources*

Share resources to cut costs and reproduction  
Develop defined structures for sharing resources  
Establish financial procedures and constantly revise budget  
Combine/pool resources for specific needs

### *Good practice characteristics/indicators regarding use of information and communication*

Build cross-sectoral linkages  
Ensure exchange of information occurs regularly  
Offer simple and straightforward guidelines for staff and students  
Ensure organisations can provide personal and direct assistance to students  
Set up an effective structure for internal communications  
Regularly update information given to staff and students

# Methodology

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## The research questions

The following key research questions were used to drive this research.

- ✧ Where are examples of successful and unsuccessful ACE–VET partnerships and/or connections in outer urban, regional and rural localities across Australia, and how do they work?
- ✧ What outcomes do the respective stakeholders in these examples expect from these partnerships and/or connections, and to what degree are these expected outcomes achieved?
- ✧ What good practices currently underpin partnerships and/or connections in these examples?
- ✧ What are the implications of the research findings for policy and practices?

In order to answer this final question, the researchers consolidated the findings into a ‘good practice guide’ which is now attached at the end of the report. This guide provides policy-makers and practitioners with a means of comparing and contrasting present practices against identified good practices in a form of benchmarking.

## Design of the research

The research for this project was designed around a series of inter-connecting stages that progressively built evidence and directions for good practice in partnerships/collaborations. We began by canvassing organisations, then undertook telephone interviews and subsequently visited a number of sites to gain more insight into their partnership practices. As such, the findings are less a result of analysis, and more a consolidation of qualitative evidence to uncover the benefits that can accrue from such connections. This qualitative methodology was adapted from a previously successful national research project in the ACE–VET area (Gelade, Catss & Gerber 2003).

## Organisations canvassed and partnerships identified

The initial stage of the research engaged participants through purposeful self-selection on the basis of their failed attempts or successes in one or more collaborations or partnerships. This method shaped the way in which examples of ACE–VET partnerships and collaborations could be identified and explored. In the knowledge that research requires both commitment and interest from participants—and that many are reluctant to meet with researchers, let alone spend time discussing issues with them—we emailed organisations asking them to nominate themselves and thus be willing participants. The organisational contacts were developed by accessing and building on a previously consolidated database initially constructed for an earlier ACE research project (Gelade, Harris & Mason 2001).

Overall, approximately 1200 organisations were sent initial emails briefly setting out the purpose of the research and inviting replies. Our enquiries canvassed whether they had, or were, undertaking some form of collaboration or partnership and to identify whether they viewed these as having successful outcomes or not. We also asked whether they would be prepared to discuss their experiences with our research team. Although this canvassing resulted in a relatively small number (in relation to the number of emails sent) of replies, they provided usefully widespread and diverse examples of both formal and informal partnerships and collaborations to explore across Australian states.

While the final number of sites who nominated themselves was not large, it is important to emphasise this willingness to participate. There is anecdotal evidence that organisations are becoming ‘research weary’ and tend to have negative attitudes towards research studies. Hence the interested and amiable cooperation of these partnered organisations was initially deemed useful to collecting data. In the final analysis, we suggest that such cooperation was, in fact, crucial to the success of the study.

In the end, our target of self-selected sites with partnership practices who were willing to be involved in the research came almost within the same state-based parameters originally suggested for the methodology in our project proposal.

NSW	Qld	Tas.	Vic.	WA	SA
3	1	2	2	1	4

As can be seen, only one organisation each from the Perth and Queensland localities nominated themselves for interview. Despite some re-canvassing of those states, these were the only ones to self-select for participation. We acknowledge also that the original canvassing began during semester/teaching period breaks at both TAFE and ACE organisations and a group of organisations possibly missed out on the enquiry, despite attempts to re-canvass later.

Following the canvassing, the selecting personnel and their partner/collaborating organisation(s) were contacted with further information and to obtain full organisational permission to take part in the telephone interviews and/or site visits. Following organisational permission, individual participants were contacted for personal permission to participate. Telephone interviews were conducted with 25 respondents and, following collation and initial analysis, the researchers undertook 13 interviews across six partnership sites to gain further clarification and information.

## The interviews

During the initial phase, telephone interviews were necessarily constrained by the amount of information which could competently be recorded, as well as given, through that medium. However, it was expected that data obtained during the telephone interviews would, in the first place, supply new information for analysis and, in the second, provide information to be compared and contrasted to the good practice characteristics as presented in the literature review. The telephone interviews ranged in length from 40–60 minutes.

The later follow-up site interviews were designed to use the first round of telephone interview data as a basis from which to build a deeper knowledge of issues relating to partnerships and collaborations between ACE and VET. To that end, the format during the site interviews more fully addressed a number of the research questions as set out above, and provided information relative to the context of the differing partnerships.

As the initial interviews were via telephone, a proforma was developed to assist interviewers follow a clearly structured format to better facilitate validity across the cohort. A copy of the



proforma is available in the online support document. The proforma is provided in the same format, as used by the researchers while they were conducting interviews.

## Partner sites

Six partnership sites were visited by the researchers, and interviews conducted with personnel from each side of the partnership. However, in New South Wales, the VET partner was not available for interview at the time of the visit, but another from a different partnership was who was subsequently interviewed instead. There were also three respondents available in Melbourne. While the majority of ACE–VET partnerships are between ACE and TAFE, one is between ACE and a city university whose staff are collaborating with a number of other organisations across Victoria to deliver vocational education and training. As can be seen from the listing below, personnel from the ACE–VET partnerships are not always close to one another geographically and, in regional areas, organisations may be quite some distance apart. Because of this separation, the partners rarely have personal contact with each other. The interviews were conducted during visits made to the following partnerships:

- ❖ New South Wales: a regional community centre partnered with a regional TAFE
- ❖ Victoria: a rural community centre partnered with a regional TAFE
- ❖ South Australia: an urban community centre partnered with a regional TAFE
- ❖ Tasmania: a regional suburban community centre partnered with a regional TAFE
- ❖ Melbourne: an urban adult community education centre partnered with a city university
- ❖ Adelaide: an urban community centre partnered with an outer urban TAFE.

# Findings from the telephone interviews

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## 1 Information about the examples of partnerships and collaborations

### Why and how are partnerships/collaborations initiated?

Partnerships and collaborations between ACE and VET are initiated in a variety of ways as well as through both formal and informal pathways. In many of the cases, our enquiries found that partnerships form as a result of casual conversations—at social events, council or ACE board meetings—between personnel from the different organisations. The personnel involved discuss what situations are occurring for their students and what opportunities are available for servicing local clients. From these discussions they find there are possibilities for sharing resources or offering collaborative courses.

At times, collaborations have resulted from organisational approaches, where the need for facilities or staff with expertise beyond one organisation or another is identified. In regional areas, in particular, it was noted that access to various students or a teaching situation that might be beyond the normal reach of a TAFE institute could be addressed by an ACE organisation working in collaboration with TAFE staff. In other areas, we found the opposite situation where TAFE could offer a less-used computing facility and ACE had the staff and students who were keen to occupy the facility during its available times.

There are also instances where a partnership is instigated by a third party: for example, the Office of Training and Tertiary Education in Victoria. This organisation saw a partnership opportunity between parties and brought them together to deliver a collaborative course. Elsewhere there are examples of a state government being approached for funding and personnel within a department helping to establish a collaborative course between ACE and TAFE. In South Australia, there are staff in TAFE who have organised meetings between TAFE and ACE to examine likely partnership opportunities which would benefit both parties.

Two of the respondents talked about the need for partners to share in the delivery of courses which had been won through a funding bid. In cases such as these, a partnership ensued when another organisation answered an advertisement but couldn't teach the whole course themselves. Winning a Department of Education, Science and Training contract and approaching other providers as potential contractors for service is also a way in which partnerships are started. In another case, one party in TAFE could no longer deliver a course that had been running for some time and used their partnership to keep the course going through an ACE organisation which had staff available.

## What preparations were made to get the partnerships going?

Participants listed a range of preparations they made in order to have their partnership or collaboration moved on from the initial discussion stage to getting it up and running. In terms of the differences between the informal collaborations and the formalised partnerships, a number of steps appear to have been taken. None of the interviewees, however, suggested that their way of preparing for the collaborative venture was superior to another; rather, it seemed that each partnership was organised in a way that suited the specific locality or related to a particular set of needs for the partners. In addition, nothing in the data indicated that preparations occurred in a particular order to ensure success. However, far less preparation was undertaken for the informal collaborations than for the semi-formal or formal partnerships. The interviewees who chose 'informal' as the term most appropriate to their partnership suggested that other than 'none at all', the only preparation involved sourcing suitable spaces for teaching and sharing resources where appropriate among the staff involved. Much more preparation was undertaken for the semi-formal and formal partnerships, with interviewees providing a range of actions:

- ✧ contracting specific staff or ensuring relevant/appropriate staff available
- ✧ liaising with Centrelink for suitable clients and/or setting up liaisons between organisations or supporting inter-organisational communications and building rapport between staff
- ✧ checking on methods of accreditation and ascertaining if facilities were suitable for each other's needs
- ✧ formulating the memorandum of understanding and ensuring that staff were appropriately committed to maintaining good communication with staff from other organisations
- ✧ adapting resources to suit the learner cohort and certificate level, purchasing resources, or sourcing and mapping appropriate curriculum materials to match student needs and module requirements
- ✧ inducting new providers or developing a guide setting out responsibilities and obligations
- ✧ promoting courses throughout the community.

## What is the nature of the partnerships?

The nature of the partnerships is as varied as the ways in which they are instigated. We were told of these collaborative ventures being operated at levels ranging from quite informal to formal. At one end of the spectrum, collaboration happens 'as necessary on an ad hoc basis'; at another level it is a semi-formal arrangement organised around letters simply outlining the various functions taken on by organisations. At the other end of the spectrum are partnerships underpinned by a highly developed memorandum of understanding between the organisations involved. Within these various levels of agreement, organisations have arranged to work together either for particular outcomes, or have set up the partnership through some form of written or spoken agreement to fund delivery or provide facilities and/or staff. However, in the majority of cases—and this is clearly an important factor—the nature of the partnership is highly dependent upon the personnel involved being those who either instigated the original idea, or were involved in the early discussions and preparations.

## Length of partnership/collaborations

Across the 22 telephone interviews conducted with participants from the self-selecting organisations, the partnerships or collaborations overviewed ranged in length from one to six years. Of note is that the three shortest are non-continuing partnerships that lasted barely a year, while those starting prior to 2003 appear to be ongoing at the time of this report. Personnel suggest that the short-term partnerships are among the few from our self-selecting cohort which

are unsuccessful. This was partly due to the fact they didn't last long enough to become established; however, other reasons contributed to their failure such as too much bureaucracy, and a lack of shared interest or ideology.

## What are the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders?

Roles and responsibilities of personnel varied across the interview sites. Some participants suggest that they undertake to do 'whatever is needed' to maintain the organisational requirements for which they have responsibility; others claim to have what they term a 'hands-off' role, where they only provide funding or a venue. The examples of these differing roles and responsibilities between the organisations and across the spectrum of interviews can be summarised as follows:

- ✧ ACE provides the learners, venues and resources; TAFE funds places
- ✧ ACE provides teaching staff; partner funds payment of staff
- ✧ TAFE promotes the course; community centre takes all other responsibilities
- ✧ Partners share roles and responsibilities, with both providing facilities and teaching staff, and pooling resources
- ✧ TAFE does the assessments; ACE does the promotion and provides facilities and courses
- ✧ ACE does everything except providing the paperwork related to TAFE requirements
- ✧ TAFE provides resources, funding, assessment tools; ACE provides the facilities, tuition, learners.

## How were/are the partnerships or collaborations sustained and managed?

Virtually all respondents viewed good communication in one form or another to be among the most crucial aspects of sustaining and managing any form of partnership or collaboration. Whether it be in person, by telephone or by email, communication underpins the success or otherwise of any working alliance between ACE and VET. Respondents outlined how they use the following communication strategies to sustain and manage partnerships:

- ✧ regular meetings among staff and in-person contact or staff visits between organisations
- ✧ regular communication through 'lots of telephone calls'
- ✧ formal regular meetings, otherwise informal communications
- ✧ employing a liaison officer to maintain communications between organisations.

Other ways in which communications within the partnerships are sustained and managed are suggested as regularly checking each other's forms and invoices to confirm they are correct, the maintenance of appropriate documentation, and 'being prepared to use each other as a valuable resource'. At the same time, a number of the ACE interviewees expressed concern over what they saw as one-way communication; they were unable to talk with or receive communication from their counterpart in the partner organisation, which was generally TAFE. They talked of their frustration at this 'one-way phone traffic' and the fact that 'TAFE are often too busy to address issues' or 'they leave it to ACE'. Interestingly, some TAFE participants similarly acknowledged their own lack of input to the partnership, which was often due to pressures of other work commitments.

What role do any others have in building connections that relate to your partnership and what alternative partnerships beyond ACE–VET have been identified?

The majority of partnerships we were able to overview did not involve other parties or people in roles which helped build or shape the connections between the partnered or collaborating organisations. From the small number who do mention a third party, this involvement appears as more peripheral than central, such as Centrelink acting as a referral agency for students undertaking courses which are within a partnership. Another peripheral role involved garnering support from local businesses to offer work placements or make suggestions about courses relevant to the area. In addition, there were local schools which could provide a venue for classes or act as liaison between school leavers and ACE. In a more central role, one of the partnerships was auspiced through the community development officer attached to a local council; however, as the partnership evolved, this officer did not have a role in its continuation.

Another partnership went beyond the usual ACE–VET link, and involved a body funded by the Catholic Church which was already allied to the ACE organisation and provided computer facilities and a computing trainer. One ongoing and well-documented alternative partnership beyond ACE–VET is between a university and ACE. This partnership arose from a Flexible Learning Network program in 1999 which delivered online professional development to ACE trainers. Our interviews covered only one of a number of university/ACE partnerships which have arisen from that particular scheme, originally instigated by academic staff at the university.

## 2 Outcomes identified by partnership personnel

What evidence of outcomes is available?

Interestingly, while all participants who identified their partnership or collaboration as a success could list a number of positive outcomes, there were very few who could provide ‘hard’ evidence to substantiate their claims. Available evidence relates only to the numbers of participants taking on collaboratively run courses as being either constant or rising, a large increase in numbers of clients taking on courses—with some classes now having waiting lists—and increased numbers articulating to TAFE courses.

Beyond these numbers—what one interviewee called counting the ‘bums on seats’—the evidence of success must instead be seen in terms of what the interviewees describe as successful and actual outcomes, which are briefly outlined in the points below. Respondents viewed a variety of outcomes from their partnerships as evidence of success, even though these could not be translated into actual ‘hard’ data.

What outcomes/gains (apart from numbers) are identifiable both for the partnership participants and for their local communities?

Respondents provided the following examples of successful outcomes.

- ✧ ‘We are able to offer free computing courses to disadvantaged clients, so can promote our area as a “learning community”’.
- ✧ There is an increase in accredited courses (certificate IV) to the local community who would not have otherwise accessed such a course and more trainers and volunteers are gaining new skills.

- ✧ There is an increase in goodwill between ACE and TAFE, with ‘the distinctions between the two blurring’.
- ✧ ‘We have strengthened relationships between organisations’.
- ✧ More courses are available in an isolated community that could not be serviced previously by TAFE.
- ✧ ‘We are developing an increased skill level among clients undertaking ACE courses’.
- ✧ ‘The partnership raised the profile of our organisations and there are increases in socialisation among older learner participants in courses held at the school locality’.
- ✧ There is provision of a base for disadvantaged school leavers ‘to identify with and get support for their particular learning needs’.
- ✧ Learners gain encouragement to access further education through newly identified pathways.
- ✧ ‘Our learners are exhibiting more social responsibility than previously’.
- ✧ ‘We are filling a gap for a particular age group—school leavers—that provides activity options and new skills’.
- ✧ The partnership ‘provides a stepping-stone’ from ACE to TAFE, and some articulation has taken place.
- ✧ ‘We can explore ways to expand the partnership into differing courses and further accreditation possibilities’.
- ✧ ‘The whole of our community benefits through better qualifications and greater employability’.
- ✧ ‘Classes mean that learners are more engaged with their local community’.
- ✧ The partnership works towards negating social disengagement of alienated cultural minorities.
- ✧ Aged care courses not previously possible prior to the partnership are providing workers for local industry. ‘Funds supplied stay in the community. There is an “educational” outcome’.
- ✧ The standard of community learning is rising and more opportunities are being made available for women to enter the workforce.
- ✧ ‘We are developing a cohort of new learners unused to further education’.
- ✧ ‘Our older learners, who are actively engaged in learning, are healthier and not a drain on the community’.
- ✧ ‘We are strengthening the regional ethos’.
- ✧ ‘Our partnership is putting ACE into the “big picture” of VET’.

When comparing the data between partners, it should be noted that there is often a disparity between their respective views of what these outcomes are. ACE personnel indicate that they place more importance on intrinsic community benefits and their ability to help disadvantaged learners, while VET personnel talk about raising their profile and place greater emphasis on numbers and learners articulating into TAFE. Superficially, it would seem that these views stem from differing ideological outlooks towards learning, delivery and its outcomes. However, other issues such as staffing, the way in which funding can be accessed, and the administrative requirements of each organisation also impact on the various attitudes and, in turn, on the partnership operations.

What differing roles have been undertaken by ACE and VET to achieve these outcomes?

A small number of respondents noted their organisation as taking on roles outside their normal operating parameters. In one case, an ACE organisation within a community house talked about providing services they had not previously offered, or had planned to offer. The partnership had allowed them to be more innovative in ideas for courses and, in turn, had made more opportunities available to local clients/learners. Another ACE organisation mentioned that the partnership had made them think further ahead. They were now fore-shadowing learner needs and asking how they could meet those needs, rather than merely being reactive to requests.

For the TAFE staff members who identified non-traditional roles, one difference they noticed was their adoption of a greater flexibility in teaching methods. Through the partnership they had been able to view and discuss ways in which ACE was delivering training and to think about how that might be used in their own organisation. They also noted that the partnership had allowed the organisational aspects of TAFE to be less rigid than usual. Another TAFE staff member revealed that due to the partnership, the way courses were delivered had seen them initially becoming more involved with ACE; this then led them to become more involved with their clients than had previously been the case. While TAFE saw this as a role change, it could also be inferred as a positive outcome, although a difficult one to measure.

### 3 Good (and not so good) practices

What enabling factors are identified or recognised?

Strong leadership, flexibility, personal contact and access to suitable resources were identified in various ways as enabling factors in keeping a partnership continuing. While these factors tend to reflect the information found in the literature review, they are different from what participants identified as actual good practices. Consequently, we have separated this set of responses from those about practices. When asked about what other factors would assist a partnership, a number of interviewees from both the ACE and VET sectors suggested that a simplification of the TAFE reporting system would be helpful, as well as a minimisation of the Australian Qualifications Training Framework (AQTF) paperwork demands. An ACE coordinator suggested that TAFE's administrative requirements mean a preference for 'block' programs, but this requirement often militates against potential ACE learners who have other commitments and cannot always attend on a regular basis. The block requirement does not allow for the flexibility often sought by ACE clients and most respondents see flexibility within a partnership as a key to success. Other enablers identified as important were:

- ✧ being aware that keeping things going is hard work
- ✧ knowing that personal contact is crucial
- ✧ providing a working model for people (within the partnerships) to identify with.

What barriers are identified or recognised?

Barriers to the success of a collaboration were also identified as being separate from actual 'practices' which occurred during a partnership. Not surprisingly, lack of flexibility of the VET sector, specifically in TAFE, was identified by personnel from both ACE *and* VET as the main barrier to the formation and continuation of a successful partnership. Other barriers noted by ACE personnel when dealing with VET were noted as:

- ✧ lack of responsiveness from TAFE personnel

- ✧ paperwork demands from TAFE bureaucracy
- ✧ lack of personal contact with staff across the partnership because of geographical factors preventing visits.

At the same time, university personnel who are VET partners with a number of ACE organisations were themselves aware that a tendency for ‘red tape’ in the university system was a particularly inhibiting factor for any partnership they formed outside.

Other barriers noted by personnel were more general in nature, and although ACE personnel did suggest that these factors were particularly problematic for their sector given the nature of their funding, suggestions were not confined to their sector. These included:

- ✧ lack of access to quality resources or lack of competence among trainers
- ✧ belief that the partnership was a competition; lack of awareness of each others’ corporate culture and of how to deal with each other
- ✧ distance between partners
- ✧ lack of self-confidence and vision by learners
- ✧ changing skill needs of industries
- ✧ lack of understanding of each others’ styles in delivery and organisational set-up
- ✧ low levels of funding to expand programs.

A final barrier noted by one respondent from ACE was a ‘lack of branding’. It was suggested that ACE staff view the loss of identity when working within a partnership as counter-productive to them having a strong profile within their community. This attitude then sets up a barrier to positive working relations with the VET sector.

### What good practices are identified by the interviewees?

Respondents were asked to identify which practices they saw as adding to the success of a partnership or collaboration with which they had previously been involved, or were currently undertaking. Again, it is noteworthy that the practices identified by these personnel reflect very closely those practices identified throughout the literature. They include:

- ✧ finding informal arrangements that can work around red tape
- ✧ being adaptable, flexible and innovative
- ✧ providing clarity about the project from the beginning—both its aims and expectations
- ✧ targeting specific personnel and liaising with these people to effect coherence and continuity
- ✧ ensuring frequent and meaningful contact
- ✧ starting with good planning and documenting everything
- ✧ appointing the ‘right’ person
- ✧ showing enthusiasm in being responsive to community needs
- ✧ maintaining goodwill and being mutually supportive
- ✧ being equitable with finances
- ✧ learning each others’ methods and ideologies
- ✧ promoting ‘give and take’ on both sides and ignoring people’s egos



- ✧ minimising misunderstandings and simplifying everything so that everyone understands
- ✧ providing training in a friendly atmosphere.

### What practices/processes are suggested as being counter-productive?

Some of the practices which respondents suggested would be best avoided were the result of experiences within failed partnerships. However, some of these partnerships had succeeded despite the counter-productive practices. Some 'bad' practices were identified by interviewees when asked what they would *not* do 'if they had their time over again':

- ✧ over-bureaucratising the partnership or creating bureaucratic bottlenecks—via TAFE 'heavy' arrangements
- ✧ showing a lack of respect for clients/tutors or competing for clients/stealing each other's students
- ✧ trying to do too much and getting bogged down in pointless logistics
- ✧ locking in a partnership before everyone is sure it is the right thing and possible to do
- ✧ pushing students towards TAFE when they are not ready for that move
- ✧ underestimating ACE staff
- ✧ setting unrealistic goals for students that set them up for failure, or having unrealistic goals for organisations that neither, or only one of them, can meet.

In the next chapter we report and consolidate findings from the site visit interviews and information obtained from the personnel about their partnerships, including the outcomes and benefits to their communities.

# The site visits

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The following findings are offered as a series of brief reports on the sites visited. The reports arise from interviews conducted with personnel met at the sites; they also include supporting information from telephone interviews, which were not necessarily with the same people we met. Each report contains details of the partnership and outlines many of the good practice strategies which have been put into making their partnership succeed.

## Regional New South Wales

This partnership operates on what participants describe as both an informal and semi-formal basis, with nothing in writing to underpin its operation. Rather, the liaison occurs through the sharing of venues and having a TAFE staff member on the board of management of the ACE organisation. Beginning in 2003 and currently ongoing, this partnership assists the delivery of a computing for seniors course where groups of students use whatever venue is available at either locality as they become available. The process for sharing venues begins with a phone call between the ACE and TAFE campus managers, and is facilitated through various teaching staff who have input to the seniors' computing course.

Although participants do not keep or have access to hard evidence or records which could help define outcomes from their collaboration, the benefits they describe are nevertheless valuable to them. They believe that their resources are being used in a sustainable manner within their own, rather than another's, community. The ACE coordinator spoke about there being 'not much money to go around' and that people in need can have their lives changed 'by engaging them in training'. Collaboration in this regional area is also suggested as an important factor in creating networks for clients who would often be isolated or unable to find suitable access to learning systems. The collaboration hence 'links people back into a system or to connections into a community'.

It's not about making the college bigger, although as a manager you do have to look at the bottom line. It's more about how do we connect, how do we keep the spider web hanging properly.

The partners see a number of other benefits arising from their partnership. For TAFE there has been the opportunity to offer new training and courses not previously available, and to have the ability to market their offerings in more than one place. There was also reference to a change in culture: they had learned through their contact with ACE to be 'less confrontational in terms of reluctant learners'; and providing the joint services had taken away the 'daunting aspect of TAFE' for such learners. This partnership has also benefited the ACE organisation in that their tutors are winning new-found respect from TAFE personnel and some of the barriers in perception about each other are being broken down.

Despite both partners having what is described as 'busy schedules', they suggest that keeping in touch and being able to talk through disagreements or difficulties that arise is the key to their

continued collaboration. Should the partnership move from an informal to a formal basis, however, they could see some difficulties arising over a number of issues. These include differences between ACE and VET tutor pay levels, funding to support the courses, and reaching agreement over which organisation teaches which part of a particular course. Bureaucratic requirements and differences in organisational culture between ACE and VET tutors and, on another level, managers are also aspects which ACE partner personnel see as needing resolution should their partnership become formalised. The two organisations believe that their partnership is sound and, given support through personnel and funding, they could continue to expand and engage more learners within their community areas.

## Regional/rural Victoria

The partnership in regional/rural Victoria is a formal one which operates through a memorandum of understanding officially signed in 2000, although the original collaborative effort began some years before. Under the current memorandum of understanding, the rural learning centre delivers Certificate III in Aged Care and Certificate IV in Assessment & Workplace Training on behalf of the TAFE partner situated some 200 kilometres distant. The partnership was originally auspiced through the Office of Training and Tertiary Education Victoria, but now runs collaboratively through the two partner organisations.

The participating personnel are highly satisfied with the arrangements and functioning of their partnership and note a number of benefits arising from the current operation that are advantageous for both, as well as for the community where the courses are conducted. This partnership has provided TAFE with a presence in an area that had become geographically and financially difficult to service, and has created a strong bond between the two organisations. Both the ACE and VET providers are keen to promote each other's services and use their ties to benefit the learners within their community. They cite key benefits as the increased opportunities for local businesses using the graduates, the possibilities of further collaborations through new courses, and the growing respect of tutors within each organisation for each other.

The TAFE organisation considers much of the success of the courses within the partnership as due to the strength of community relations engendered by the ACE organisation and its personnel. Having high quality teaching staff who are also part of a community, rather than people who only go in to an area to teach and then leave again, has impacted positively on the success of their programs and directly affected outcomes. For ACE, an important benefit has been the provision of courses available that would not have been possible without the collaborative effort. The courses are raising the profile of the learning centre while also providing training for older learners, mostly women, who would otherwise be unlikely to participate in this type of training for work. They cite up to 35 students undertaking courses at a time, paying reasonable fees and who often come in from outlying towns. The influx of students benefits local business in two ways; firstly, through increased spending by the students and, secondly, by providing qualified staff.

The best feedback we get is that most people get jobs, and they often are employed before they finish their certificate. Like they go out on work placement, they do about fifteen weeks ... And nine times out of ten they take those people on as employees.

Both organisations cited communication as the key to a successful partnership, as well as having a common goal in making the learners their priority. They agreed that partnership success is often dependent on the personalities and hard work of each coordinator. However, both were keen to see their partnership take on its own life and operate as 'part of the culture of the organisation'. This partnership has been a long time in the making and has benefited from each organisation

taking the time to understand the operational aspects of each other and to see where they could make changes to accommodate different needs and functionality.

## Regional/urban South Australia

This formal partnership operates between a community centre in the outer suburbs of Adelaide, and a large regional TAFE several hours' drive from the city. The community centre runs courses on behalf of the TAFE and the partnership is underpinned by a formal contract between the two organisations. The community centre provides basic information technology (IT) training in three units of a certificate I to unemployed learners who are over 45, known as the BITES (Basic IT Enabling Skills) course. The partnership has operated for three years and is expected to be ongoing, as long as the Department of Education, Science and Training funding continues to support the collaboration.

Both partners are highly satisfied with their arrangement, which operates on the basis of TAFE providing the resources, funding and assessment tools and ACE the facilities, tuition and sourcing the learners. These learners are either referred to the community centre from Centrelink/Job Network programs or are attracted to the centre by the marketing that takes place around the local community. While the arrangement began as a business agreement, the two organisations consider that the benefits go beyond financial consideration and enable them actively to support learners in a community setting in which specific needs are being met. It is estimated that up to 60% of the learners either go on to employment, some form of further training (VET priority programs) or, as clients have claimed, benefit from the personal up-skilling.

The community centre noted that they could not have offered the program without the support provided through the partnership, whether financial or administrative. It has become 'an extra resource we can offer to people within this community... who could not see themselves going off to TAFE to do computing'. As the community centre receives the funding directly, the partnership is thus providing it with a means of development and opportunity for further growth by reaching more learners. Although the majority of tutors within the ACE provider were already accredited to the level needed for teaching this particular course, the requirements set out by the TAFE have prompted volunteer tutors to undertake certificate IV training which would not have occurred without the partnership.

A key advantage for the VET sector (although not for this particular TAFE as it is situated too far away) is that more learners are articulating into TAFE courses. The partners feel that the non-threatening learning environment offered by the community centre, sometimes not available through TAFE, is another important factor in the success of the course. This partnership (one of several the TAFE has with community centres across SA) has been directly responsible for clarifying the importance of providing a more nurturing and flexible environment for learners who are less confident and require greater support than many TAFE clients.

Because they provide a nice environment, a small environment that's nurturing ... they'll get them through. We've got to make money from this course, yeah, but they also [make] some [money] too. And they add to, I don't know, the warmth of the whole program.

This TAFE has adopted some of the ACE strategies learned through the partnership and now creates a similarly non-threatening and safe learning environment for their own older learners who are undertaking a similar course. The critical aspects of success for this partnership's continuation are 'open and honest' communication among personnel and clarity in requirements and paperwork. They have also tried to understand each other's organisational requirements and accounted for the needs of each one. The partners keep in touch through telephone and email as well as taking part in what they call 'network meetings' which are face-to-face gatherings held on

a regular basis. In this partnership, TAFE has attempted to streamline some of their paperwork while also providing full copies of resources such as teaching materials and setting up simplified systems of accounting.

## Regional Tasmania

The partnership between the regional Tasmanian TAFE and a community centre in the same area is quite informal, with no paperwork associated with its organisation. The centre offers courses in adult literacy and basic education and basic computing. These computing courses are run under the auspices of ACE at a local primary school utilising its computer laboratory, with TAFE tutors as the teaching staff. The ACE literacy classes at the community centre are given by TAFE tutors, who also provide adult literacy and basic education training for volunteers within that ACE setting. The community centre arranges all the students/clients, the localities and the administration, with TAFE providing the teaching expertise, workbooks and funding for the teaching time. Student attendances are then recorded by TAFE which can then claim the student hours for funding.

The collaboration began in 2004 following a conversation the previous year between the local ACE and VET managers about opportunities to expand their profiles within the community and address the needs of ACE clients in certain areas. It is considered to be a very successful collaboration by the participant organisations, and both are actively seeking innovative ways to expand the scheme with further joint courses should funding be available. The TAFE in this area wants to be seen as an innovative organisation by their local community and believes that this type of outreach program is helping to bring more people into TAFE courses. TAFE's relationship with ACE and the learners is breaking down some of the barriers that learners have about their perceived ability to access TAFE courses.

The courses within the partnership are promoted through the ACE childcare centre, local schools in newsletters and through local businesses and letter drops. The main interest in the courses comes from women who have been out of the workforce through parenting, older women, and single mothers who want to gain some computing skills. ACE is also able to offer childcare while the mothers undertake their training which is providing support for their learning. Each client/student takes on an individual learning plan, and is able to work at his or her own speed without the binding parameters of a block course. TAFE tutors have also changed some of their teaching methods and styles of delivery to accommodate the learning needs of the ACE cohort.

The organisers agree that it is important for their partnership that they remain flexible and innovative while still having a clear focus about objectives. However, this partnership depends a great deal on the personalities of the managers and their interest in keeping it going. Thus, although the partnership works well in its current informal state, the participants are concerned that without some formalisation—perhaps through a memorandum of understanding—the impetus may be lost should different personnel take over either of their positions. At the same time, they do not want to tie up the courses or students with bureaucratic requirements usually associated with TAFE entrance, which has been circumvented to some degree through this current partnership.

While TAFE is not seeing actual outcomes which can be readily quantified in terms of absolute numbers articulating into TAFE courses, the partnership has 'opened pathways' to such possibilities. The TAFE tutors are seeing new confidence building in the student clients of the courses. For ACE, the outcomes have been an increase in numbers of clients, with some classes now having a waiting list, so 'you know you're doing something right when that happens'. The ACE coordinator is noticing an increase in the skill level of teaching by volunteers and more flexibility in teaching methods and organisation. The joint classes held at the local primary school

have helped learners with socialisation and they are also breaking down the ‘school phobia’ towards learning that has been present in some community members.

## Urban Melbourne

This formal partnership between an urban ACE and a city university in Melbourne began as a linkage initiated in 1999 through the Learning Networks Program auspiced by the Office of Training and Tertiary Education Victoria. The early learning networks idea arose from a tender shaped to focus on access and equity and the use of online learning. The university sought out a number of ACE organisations to take part in a program for flexible learning networks across the state. The original program was funded for three years and, although that funding ceased, the success of the program saw several of the ACE organisations and the university opt to continue in their respective partnerships. This highly successful partnership is one of those continuing programs and in its current format is underpinned by a signed agreement that delineates the shared responsibilities and functions of each partner. The university now supports the program financially as a part of its access and equity commitment to the community.

The ACE organisation delivers the university’s basic courses in information technology and business studies at certificate II and III level, as well as access courses (preparatory/prevocational). There is also a Diploma of Further Education course that articulates directly into first year at the university. These courses are taught by ACE staff using the information technology facilities at its centre, with the university supplying the course materials, enrolment system, accreditation and, where necessary, the articulation pathways into higher education.

Both participants consider their thriving cooperative arrangement to be largely a result of the ‘breathing space’ that the first three funded years provided while they worked through any difficulties and misunderstandings. The university partner acknowledges the flexibility and adaptability of ACE and how these factors allow them to accommodate the wide diversity of learners with different needs who are attracted to the program. In the same way, the ACE organisation is aware of the strictures facing the university partners in terms of a layered bureaucracy and allied administrative functions. Both try to account for the disparity between the organisational structures while acknowledging the gulf between them.

The personnel see the strength of their partnership as partly due to the respect they have gained for each other and for the way their negotiations have managed to win positive outcomes for each organisation, despite the apparently different focus each has from the wider community perspective. The partners recommend the practice of holding formal meetings, which they do on a quarterly basis, and following a regular audit process. They also have informal meetings, regular email and phone conversations, and coffee discussions when visiting each other to ensure that all information and concerns are shared.

The university is benefiting from ‘getting to know’ communities beyond their inner city locality and making contacts through ACE with businesses and industries. These contacts are an important factor in establishing pathways for the university into other organisations. The university also notes the benefits both for their organisation and the community through raising their access and equity delivery, which has resulted in actual outcomes of transition and articulation into university learning for the target groups.

The ACE organisation sees advantage for their organisation in having their profile raised through their alliance with the higher education sector and the credibility that being able to ‘have a “.....” university sticker on the back window’ gives to both learners and ACE. In addition, their facilities are being used to the full extent and they are able to consider extending their programs into other areas for online delivery such as the Certificate IV in Business. The learners not only gain the

value of accreditation on completion, but are also able to use the status of a university as provider on their curriculum vitae when applying for positions or further education opportunities. Being part of the dual system is also breaking down barriers for learners who would not have previously considered undertaking VET-based higher qualifications. The partners are proud of what they have achieved in this partnership.

## Urban Adelaide

This partnership is between a small community centre in an outer suburb south of Adelaide and a large outer urban TAFE in a rapidly expanding community just beyond the Adelaide suburban fringe. Under a semi-formal partnership arrangement that is described in a letter of intent, the ACE centre delivers a Certificate I in Child Care in collaboration with TAFE. There are no binding clauses within the partnership's letter of arrangement and, while the current client base is very small, the participants nevertheless expect that the partnership will be ongoing and expand. They do, however, understand that its functioning is dependent upon client demand, funding and shifts in VET priorities within the TAFE sector.

The partnership has occasionally struggled to keep going since its inception in 2003, because it is mostly driven by the personalities involved. The frequent changes in coordinating staff resulted in the collaboration floundering at times. The current partners are planning to put a memorandum of understanding in place to better protect the operation of the partnership. The VET coordinator at TAFE is also keen to see the development of some form of operational model which can be used by any personnel who follow in the positions of the current partnership coordinators. The partners now meet twice a year and keep in contact via telephone should any problems occur. At the present time, the TAFE partner provides course materials in a manual form and undertakes audits as necessary. The community college teaches the course and sources the students. There is a community development officer who assists the college with administrative issues as they occur and who provides support through the local council.

Actual outcomes in terms of numbers either articulating upwards into higher certification or on to other courses have not been quantified at this time. Other positive benefits arising from the collaborative arrangement are noticed by the partners, who both speak about the partnership providing 'a bridge' that assists hesitant learners to move from community-based learning to the VET sector. For these TAFE staff, the partnership is seen as a means of supporting learners to make that transition while also gaining early study skills that allow TAFE to concentrate on course content. They also cite previous students who, despite being accepted and starting TAFE courses, did not continue on with their studies due their 'discomfort and lack of self-confidence', even though they had the actual skills. Because this ACE centre can also offer one-to-one support, childcare and flexible delivery, the burden of undertaking new learning processes is lessened. The benefits are being shared across ACE, which gains funding, the students who gain skills, and the VET provider who gains 'learning-ready' students. This partnership is addressing such issues by having the early certification occurring through the community centre, where client confidence and ability can be built up while in an apparently less threatening environment.

For the TAFE partner, the most crucial aspect of continued success for this collaboration—as well as any other partnerships currently operating between the VET–ACE sectors—is putting in place some form of clearly enunciated, written model of action and requirements. This model should also include a succession plan, and would remove uncertainty and give impetus for partnerships to continue, even when the developmental staff are no longer involved. Another good practice suggested from this respondent's 'wish list' was for the VET sector, probably in conjunction with the ACE sector, to form what she termed 'a flying squad':

A group of people that are committed to a type of philosophy ... with a whole range of skills, a whole range of programs so that if someone out there in the community rings up and says 'this is what we'd like to do', it's that group who would respond. So you'd get a consistent approach ... and they could have the ability to mentor and to support trainers out there and share ... and come up with strategies.

The partners plan a more structured agreement to be put in place as their understanding and acknowledgement of each other's needs and functions grows. Should the partnership progress, the ACE coordinator would be keen to have the VET-ACE collaboration bring TAFE tutors into the community college and perhaps TAFE students as well where appropriate. Such practices are seen as another step towards breaking down the reticence of ACE students and their concern that attending TAFE is too big a step for them to take.

Working collaboratively through an agreement that clearly states goals, guidelines and parameters of practice is suggested as being at the basis of good practice for any partnership. The TAFE representative has been involved in previous partnerships where 'poaching' of students occurred and where confusion surrounded the joint understanding of goals, resulting in losses for the institutions involved and for the students. That partnership struggled and unfortunately resulted in negative interactions between the two organisations. As a result, this current collaboration is being carefully, if slowly, built and all parties are learning from each other and from their previous experiences.



# Summary and implications of the research findings for policy, practice and research

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The site visits helped to enrich our understanding of the processes and the outcomes which enhance connections between the ACE and VET sectors and, in turn, contribute to the learning experiences of those who live in communities and regions. Much of the information we collected concurred with the telephone interview data, presented in the previous chapter, as well as with the knowledge gleaned from the literature review. The information from the sites broadens knowledge about how both partnerships (formal collaborations between organisations), and connections (more informal collaborations, perhaps among staff across organisations), between ACE and VET can be maximised to achieve the broad goals of the collaborating bodies. The key messages for success from all participants related to communication, flexibility, negotiation and time management. While funding plays a part in the success of some partnerships, few participants suggested that it is of greater importance over other, more personality driven, traits. We consistently heard participants talk about the way in which they have learned from each other and their organisations, and that this has added to the respect and consideration they gave towards making the partnership work.

The findings we have presented in this report indicate that engagement with learning and training opportunities is being enhanced by partnerships between ACE and VET in communities where such partnerships operate. As a consequence, it would appear that there are implications for policy development that further underpins, auspices and promotes partnerships. In terms of practice, the findings clearly show there are gains to be made for both ACE and VET organisations—and their client students and communities—if they are able to instigate the types of practices outlined by our respondents. At the same time, we acknowledge that the findings indicate concern by both organisations that bureaucratic practices can be counter-productive and that not all organisations can happily collaborate. However, it is heartening that the organisations themselves acknowledge such issues and therefore it would seem that partnerships and collaborations can be a key to opening up conversations about mitigating the effects of stresses occurring between organisations.

We see that partnerships are significant to the survival and growth of a number of ACE–VET organisations within a difficult economic climate. Such growth is proving an important factor in helping a number of communities to sustain and promote their lifelong learning, community capacity-building and industry skill needs in both urban and regional areas. These outcomes form a basis from which to research how the promotion of partnerships as a practice for training and learning can be developed through the auspices of various other government bodies.

It is important to point out at this stage that both telephone interviews and site visit data concur with the information taken from the literature regarding good practice principles across various collaborations. Such a concurrence allows us confidently to propose a number of guidelines for practice within the establishment and process of partnerships between ACE and VET organisations. Consequently, as an attachment to this report we provide a brief ‘good practice guide’. This guide will be of assistance to organisations planning future partnerships and collaborations and to policy-makers who may auspice and promote such plans.

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# Support document details

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Additional information relating to this research is available in *Learning collaborations between ACE and vocational education and training: Good practice partnerships—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVET's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1708.html>>. The document contains:

- ✧ Methodological information
- ✧ Ethical clearance
- ✧ Full source listing
- ✧ Framework of good practice indicators
- ✧ The questionnaire
- ✧ Questionnaire proforma
- ✧ References



The National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program is coordinated and managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through the Department of Education, Science and Training.

This program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector.

Research funding is awarded to organisations via a competitive grants process.

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