OCCASIONAL PAPER

Review of NCVER building researcher capacity initiative

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Vocational Education Research

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Australian Government
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

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The NVETRE 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>.

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About the research

Review of NCVER building researcher capacity initiative

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The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is committed to building researcher capacity in the vocational education and training (VET) sector by encouraging early-career researchers, VET professionals and experienced researchers from outside the sector to undertake research in vocational education and training. In support of this, NCVER allocated $450 000 over three years to four programs: community of practice scholarships aimed at novice researchers undertaking a workplace-focused research project; academic scholarships aimed at VET professionals undertaking an academic course of study such as honours or masters by research; a fellowship scheme; and the VET Researcher of the Year Award. NCVER has initiated a review of these programs, now in their third year, to inform future directions.

This review explored the effectiveness of the programs in expanding the number and quality of researchers in the VET sector, other benefits of the programs, value for money, as well as the effectiveness of management arrangements and communication.

Key messages

- NCVER's building researcher capacity initiative has achieved a high profile in the VET research community.
- The outcomes achieved from the various building researcher capacity programs were mixed, in particular:
  - Arguably, the community of practice program has been the most popular and successful program, with participants producing research that is having an impact in their organisations. However, given the focus on small, workplace-based projects rather than academic research, it is unlikely that the program will actually produce many new researchers for the VET sector.
  - The impact of the academic program has been harder to assess, as only one participant has completed to date. However, it is likely that the participants would have enrolled in these courses of study without the NCVER funding.
  - In terms of the fellowship program, to date this has not generated the interest that was originally anticipated. However, at the time of the review, one new fellowship was being confirmed and another being investigated.

The findings of the review will feed into the building researcher capacity program.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director

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Background to the review

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is committed to building researcher capacity in the VET sector by:

- attracting experienced researchers from outside the sector
- encouraging early-career researchers
- supporting VET professionals to undertake research.

To support this objective, NCVER allocated $450 000 over three years. From these funds, NCVER established the following programs:

- community of practice scholarships aimed at novice researchers undertaking a workplace-focused research project, managed by Berwyn Clayton and Geri Pancini from the Work-based Education Research Centre at Victoria University
- a mentoring program, through which the community of practice participants received mentoring from experienced researchers, run by Llandis Barratt-Pugh on behalf of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA)
- academic scholarships aimed at novice researchers interested in pursuing an academic pathway such as honours or masters by research, managed by Roger Harris from the University of South Australia
- NCVER fellowship scheme
- VET Researcher of the Year Award.

In addition to funding these programs, NCVER aimed to publish each of the papers scholarship holders produced. It was intended that this would give participants an insight into the way in which NCVER worked and offer an additional level of quality assurance. Draft reports were internally reviewed and final reports copy-edited in accordance with NCVER style. NCVER saw these processes as important elements in the process of participants learning about research.

Reason for the review

The building researcher capacity initiative was established in 2007 and funded over three years until 2010. In order to inform the future direction of the initiative, it was decided to review the program. The key questions that the review explored are:

- Has the program been effective in expanding the number and quality of researchers in the VET sector?
- Did the program benefit participants and has it resulted in new researchers being retained beyond the original award?
- How effectively was the body of work disseminated?
- Did the program deliver good value for money?

In particular, the review will inform NCVER management of the effectiveness of the approach in terms of:

- ✧ building researcher capacity in the sector, including within TAFE (technical and further education) institutes, private providers and universities
- ✧ improving the quality and diversity of research
- ✧ managing and disseminating the program of work, most specifically NCVER's role in this process.

Outcomes

The findings of the review will take the form of recommendations about how to progress NCVER's effort to build researcher capacity, for which there is support in the sector.

To ensure integration of the building researcher capacity initiative into NCVER's budgeting planning, it is important to have findings of the evaluation in 2010.

Approach to the review

The review used a two-pronged approach for eliciting information on the effectiveness of the building researcher capacity initiative.

Firstly, the managers of the various programs within the building researcher capacity initiative were interviewed and asked to reflect on the extent to which the program has met its primary objectives. It was considered important to also interview the participants in the programs to understand whether they had been able to realise their personal (and organisational) objectives for participation. NCVER managers were also interviewed to gauge the extent to which the management and communication strategies had been effective.

Secondly, we reviewed progress reports provided to NCVER by the program managers themselves and the NCVER liaison managers. In many cases, these provided useful insights into the types of issues that had been encountered and their subsequent solutions.

Findings from the review

This section summarises the findings in terms of the main questions for the review. Some overall comments are then made on the various programs reviewed, as well as comments on the management arrangements for each program. More detailed feedback can be found at appendix 1.

Value for money

This was not easy to assess in terms of any specific measure. In terms of impact, there were numerous examples of where the research conducted by the participants has had an impact within their organisation or in the wider VET community. In one case, the research was cited favourably in the New South Wales Parliament, while in another, the research led to further work, funded by the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training.

In relation to returns to research, or the numbers of completed papers—this has been less successful to date. Only a few participants in each program had completed their papers at the time of the review. Indeed, only one academic program paper has been published to date. However, most if not all had received the opportunity to 'air' their research either at the National Vocational Education and Training Research Conference (No Frills) or other seminars and workshops, and one participant has published material based on his research project in an academic journal.[1]

It appears that the second cohort of the community of practice participants are generating more, and more timely research reports than the first cohort, which is encouraging. This is likely to be a consequence of refinements to the program, which were introduced in the second year.

Adding to overall research capacity

Our analysis concluded that the programs have not substantially increased the number of researchers in the VET sector at this stage. The academic program may result in additional researchers, although the issue here is the extent to which these researchers would have enrolled in higher degrees anyway—without the additional support of the NCVER building researcher capacity program—which makes assessing 'additionality' difficult.

There have been other benefits, however, in terms of instilling a research culture in the organisations that the participants represent. Both participants and program managers alike mentioned that their awareness of the range of research and statistical information (particularly from NCVER) had increased. Also, the use of research to inform organisational culture and

[1] This participant also completed his paper for NCVER.

planning has been widespread. It is hoped that this will translate to a broader audience for VET research.

Effectiveness of research and dissemination activities

As the process of publishing and disseminating the research from the programs is still occurring, it is too early to make firm conclusions. There was some critical feedback from program managers that the format of the standard NCVER occasional paper may not be the most appropriate research product for these types of researchers and that to elevate the 'prestige' of the program it would be helpful to produce the reports in colour.[2]

Almost universally, respondents indicated that dissemination of new researcher work through attendance at the No Frills conference and other specialised research forums was highly effective. In fact, the program managers were keen for a larger proportion of the designated funds to be made available for these types of events.

Outcomes achieved from the programs

- The community of practice program has garnered a great deal of interest from the VET research community and very positive feedback from those involved in the program. It is unlikely that the program will actually produce many new researchers for the VET sector, given its focus on VET practitioners conducting small, workplace-based projects, rather than on those who wish to pursue an academic pathway. However, the projects are producing useful findings for the participants' organisations and seem to be encouraging participants and their employers to recognise the value and usefulness of research in general. For those participants who are interested in undertaking higher-level research, it might be useful to build in some clearer pathways for them to follow on completion of the program.
- The impact of the academic program was harder to assess as only one participant has completed to date. Given that the participants in this program are undertaking formal academic research training, it seems plausible that this program might result in new researchers. However, the participants would probably have enrolled in these courses of study without the NCVER funding, making the value for money of this program questionable, especially given that publications are not readily forthcoming. The key benefit of the program for participants seems to be the networking opportunities it provides, both with other participants and through attendance at conferences.
- In terms of the fellowship program, to date this has not generated the interest that was originally anticipated. However, at the time of the review, one new fellowship was being confirmed and another being investigated.
- In relation to the VET Researcher of the Year Award, this was not a program that the review team considered in detail. However, it is noted that the award will now be associated with the No Frills conference (rather than the National Training Awards). This is in line with its focus on recognising excellence in research.

Management arrangements and communication

In terms of operational relationships and synergies between the different program managers, these appeared to work quite well.

[2] Since the review, NCVER uses a different coloured cover for papers from the building researcher capacity initiative.

It was apparent that there was considerable 'goodwill' and a history of collaboration between the different organisations involved in the building researcher capacity initiative, or more specifically between the program managers within these organisations. This has led to generally effective communication and some valuable networking opportunities.

Similarly, the relationship between the managers of the programs and key NCVER staff was constructive and many interviewed indicated this has been a feature of the collaboration. The program managers consistently reiterated the importance of providing 'linking infrastructure'[3]—and that NCVER played an important role in this.

Conclusions

The review found that the building researcher capacity initiative has largely met its key objectives; however, more needs to be done to generate interest in and increase the numbers of people actively engaged in VET research. What we can say is that the initiative has been successful in promoting the value of research within practitioner organisations. Many examples were observed where individual research projects have had an impact in organisations, especially in terms of policy or practice. It will be important for the future, however, to focus on mechanisms that will increase the pool of experienced researchers available to the field.

Almost universally, respondents agreed that the current building researcher capacity initiative was worth continuing and was the most appropriate model to deliver an expanded research pool in vocational education and training. However, ensuring there are mechanisms and opportunities for participants to remain engaged in the research after their participation in the program is crucial.

[3] Linking infrastructure in this case relates to support for new researchers in terms of providing research methods and data workshops, templates and assistance for report-writing and opportunities to present the outcomes of their research.

Appendix 1: program findings

Community of practice program

To inform the review of the community of practice program, interviews were conducted with four participants, one mentor, one employer, four members of the building researcher capacity advisory board, the program managers and NCVER staff. The table below summarises participation in the program to date.

Table 1 Summary of participants in the community of practice

Year	No. of participants	No. completed	No. did not complete
2008	10	4 published	3 withdrew (change of job, health)
			3 did not complete
			1 continued in 2009 with new employer and topic
2009	10 + 1 from 2008	As at end of June 2010, 7 final drafts received and reviewed, 6 revised versions received	1 withdrew (change of job)
		3 participants have negotiated extensions	
2010	10	Due in 2011	1 withdrew (health)

Strengths of program and benefits to participants

The program was seen as meeting an important need in helping to build researcher capacity among VET professionals, while acknowledging workplace-based research as valuable. The model underpinning the program—the community of practice itself, the mentoring scheme and the employer support—was also seen as a strength. Participants particularly valued the workshops, which gave them face-to-face time with the community, and their mentors, who gave them critical advice on the research process. A further strength of the program was its 'continuous improvement' philosophy, with experiences in the first years of the program being used to inform the approach for later years. For example, a second workshop was introduced to give the participants more face-to-face contact as well instruction on how to write up their research.

The participants interviewed identified a number of benefits from participation in the program, including increased confidence, improved research skills and increased knowledge of their subject area. They also noted that being involved in the program had raised the profile of their work within and outside their organisations. They were particularly enthusiastic about the networking opportunities the program had afforded, both with other novice researchers and more experienced VET researchers. This had opened up opportunities to work on other research

projects and helped the participants to feel connected to the VET research world, as well as giving them an understanding of NCVER processes.

Challenges for participants

Finding the time, particularly to write up the report, appears to have been a key challenge for participants, with all mentioning it in their interviews. While employers were required to give their employees support in undertaking this project, for most this has been limited to the data-collection stage. One interviewee noted that the employer was more likely to be supportive when the project had clear workplace implications, while another noted that the small size of the project meant it was not an organisational priority. Interviewees suggested that the requirements and expectations of the project should be more clearly articulated at the application stage, so that potential applicants appreciate the time commitment they will be required to make up front. The program managers and NCVER are aware that some participants have had problems accessing support from employers. To overcome this, the applications for the more recent years of the program have required more explicit commitments from employers in relation to the form of their support.

Time management in general was also identified as a challenge, with some participants noting that they had struggled with having long deadlines with little interim follow-up to ensure they were on track. One interviewee noted that it was very different from formal study in that there were no consequences for failing to meet deadlines, and that this had made her a little slack. While some mentors had taken it upon themselves to chase their participant, it was felt that this should not be expected of the mentors. The interviewees suggested that more follow-up from the program managers might be a good alternative.

Another challenge identified by some participants was that the research project demanded quite high-level skills from them, given that they came into the program as novice researchers. Interviewees proposed that a longer initial workshop would give them a more detailed introduction into the processes of conducting research. In addition, this would give participants more opportunity to bond with each other and thus form a stronger community of practice—some (but not all) interviewees felt that the sense of community could be stronger. This may be somewhat due to a lack of ease with using an online social networking site to connect the community—one interviewee felt she let the community down by not contributing to this at all, but she just could not engage with it. As the website used is probably unfamiliar to most participants at the beginning of the program, it may be worth adding a training session to the first workshop.

Ethics principles and procedures have caused confusion for participants and also mentors. Some mentors have encouraged their participants to put their projects through complicated university ethics processes. From NCVER's perspective, this is overkill for the small projects; it is sufficient for the projects to abide by the AVETRA's code of ethics. However, there has also been at least one case where the research project has strayed into advocacy. It seems there is a need for greater clarity associated with ethics: the roles and responsibilities of the mentors and the program managers need to be clearly established, and participants may need a stronger introduction to the principles of ethical research in the first workshop.

Mentoring scheme

Participants spoke very positively about the mentoring scheme, describing it as a critical and integral part of the program that they could not have done without. It was seen as the way in which critical guidance about the research process is gained, more so than the community of practice itself.

The flip side of this is that when the mentoring does not work well, as has been the case for one or two participants, it can significantly jeopardise their projects. One participant's mentor did not respond at all to queries; this participant failed to complete her project. Other mentors have been very supportive of their participants but have not really taken on a 'critical' role to help the participants to achieve high-quality research, or have overly complicated the project by pushing it through bureaucratic ethics clearance processes. These experiences suggest that it is important that the mentors have the same expectations as NCVER about their role and the nature of the participants' projects. There may be scope to clarify these expectations in the manual provided to mentors when they join the program.

Mentors also benefit from being a part of the program, with one mentor stating that it was a rewarding role and that it was gratifying to feel part of a group committed to encouraging VET research. Seven mentors have so far participated in more than one year of the three years of the program, and all previous mentors have remained on the mentor register, suggesting they have had a positive experience.

Interviewees indentified a couple of factors that contribute to a successful mentoring experience. Co-location was mentioned as very important by all interviewees, with face-to-face meetings being necessary to build a good relationship, while having a prior connection with the mentor was also seen as helpful. Both of these factors have now been incorporated into the advice given to new participants when selecting a mentor. Some challenges still remain, in particular solving distance issues for more remote participants in locations such as Tasmania and the Northern Territory.

Impact of program

The community of practice program is having an impact, both in terms of the participants' specific projects and in the attitudes adopted by participants and their workplaces towards research in general. In terms of the specific projects, all except one interviewee believed that their research would have an influence on their workplace's policy or practice. The interviewee who disagreed felt that she was too low in the chain of authority to have an impact. This interviewee had problems with her employer support and lacked a 'champion' in a higher position. Participants were also keen to present their findings at conferences and other forums, so that their work might have an impact beyond their workplace. As participants from the second year of the program are only just finishing their papers, it is too early to tell what impact their work will actually have, but the two interviewees from the first year of the program confirmed that their findings had been used—despite one of the interviewees not actually having completed her paper for NCVER. One interviewee's project has had an influence on policy in youth programs in her workplace and was cited in New South Wales Parliament; the other has fed into the national e-portfolio reference committee for the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, as well as spawning a larger project to develop e-portfolios for Indigenous staff working in schools in remote Northern Territory communities, funded by the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training.

In terms of attitudes towards research more generally, some of the participants seem interested in going on to do further research, and those who do not at least appear to be convinced about the value of using research to inform policy and practice. Interviewees indicated a range of actions they had undertaken and intentions they had formed as a result of being involved in the program. One participant is now a part of a research project funded in NCVER's most recent funding round; another spoke of intending to apply for NCVER funds in the next round, as well as of a desire to be a mentor; and a third has been encouraging her subordinates to become reflective practitioners, with two of these teachers making a presentation on their work at No Frills this

year (see box). Some of the other participants not interviewed as part of this review have also made enquiries about how to become involved in further research after they have completed their papers. Currently there is no clear next step for participants; it may be worth giving thought to how to build this in. There seems to be interest in some sort of an alumnus, with one interviewee stating that, while the participants from her year keep in touch at conferences and other events, it would be nice to know the participants from other years of the program as well.

Interviewees also gave many positive examples of how their workplaces have been taking steps to further increase their involvement with VET research, following on from their participation in the community of practice program. These include sending staff to conferences, encouraging other staff to apply for the community of practice program, seeking research funding opportunities, hosting No Frills, starting a research committee, and developing a research centre around VET research. However, the employer interviewed noted that it is hard to prove a causal relationship, since the workplaces involved in the program were probably reasonably supportive of research already, or else they would not have offered support to their employees to participate.

Kath's goal when applying for the community of practice program was to move trades teachers from just being practitioners to being reflective practitioners who can evaluate their own practice. She felt that if she was going to ask this of others, she needed some research experience herself first.

Having completed her project, Kath is proud of her achievement but knows she does not want to become a researcher per se. Instead, she is hard at work on her original goal, and now has a personal performance indicator about getting trades teachers to present papers at national conferences. She has already had two this year present at No Frills, and plans to increase the numbers in subsequent years.

Comments from the advisory group

The community of practice advisory group was asked to comment on the level of interest and quality of applications. It was felt that there was a strong level of interest in the program from the VET sector in general, with numbers of applicants growing and the diversity of their backgrounds increasing, although perhaps there was less interest than there should have been from some quarters such as private providers. Broader marketing of the program could solve this; the representative from the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) is committed to pushing the program more in future years. The quality of applications was described as quite variable, with many research proposals not well written or focused, and far too large to be completed under the resource and time constraints of the program, although it was noted that it may be unfair to expect anything too polished since the applications are coming from novice researchers. This was addressed in later years of the program by asking applicants to outline a workplace problem they wished to investigate rather than requiring a research proposal.

The advisory group was also asked about outcomes from the program, but found it difficult to make comments based on the limited amount of information they receive at their yearly meetings, where the focus is on selecting new participants. There was interest in the group meeting across the course of the program to gain a deeper understanding of the program's outcomes. One possibility might be to hold a second meeting prior to opening the call for applications to discuss selection criteria and promotion strategies. The group could also be updated on what has been published from the previous year's program and how the current year's participants are progressing at this stage. This meeting could be held via teleconference, as per the advisory group's terms of reference.

Academic scholarship program

For this program, the program manager, five participants, NCVER executive and relevant NCVER staff were interviewed. In addition, progress reports on the program were examined. The academic scholarship program differs from the community of practice program in that it is aimed at postgraduate qualifications and so is more long-term in nature, meaning that it will be some time before its full benefits are realised. Indeed, to date, there has only been one completion and one occasional paper delivered to NCVER. This makes it quite difficult to judge the outcomes of the program; nevertheless, we can gather impressions of the program to date. The table below summarises participation in the program.

Table 2 Summary of participants in the academic program

Year	No. of participants	Qualification levels	No. completed	No. no longer with program*
2008	5	Doctorate – 2	Masters – 1	1 (change of job)
		Masters – 1		
		Honours – 1		
		Grad. cert. – 1		
2009	7	Doctorate – 5		
		Masters – 2		
2010	7	Doctorate – 2		
		Masters – 4		
		Honours – 1		

* As far as we are aware.

Participants interviewed became aware of the program through advice either from their supervisor or someone in management. Comment was made by an NCVER staff member that the academic scholarship program was not advertised to the same extent as the community of practice program. It was thought that in future there could be one selection panel overseeing both the community of practice and academic programs.

Overall, participants interviewed were quite satisfied with this program. The main benefit they see from the program is networking, both in terms of building and maintaining networks. This includes a requirement as part of the program to attend conferences. Most participants commented that they had or were preparing to present at a conference. One had already attended several conferences and is now beginning to present their work. Several other benefits were mentioned by one or more participants. These include improving self-esteem, collegiality, learning how to apply for research funding, developing research skills, raising the profile of the institution, and learning how to write for particular audiences. One participant mentioned that the information sent out by NCVER on writing for audiences was particularly useful.

In addition to personal benefits, there are perceived benefits to the VET system in terms of the production of research papers and also through dissemination of the research at various forums such as conferences. It was also mentioned that the program develops critical thinking skills. Of course, it is difficult to quantify any impact on the VET system to date.

The monetary component of the program, while modest at $4000, was nevertheless seen as being useful in defraying some of the costs associated with the qualification and giving assistance to attend conferences. However, it is doubtful whether it plays much of a role. One participant said that they had intended to enrol in the postgraduate qualification anyway when the advertisement for this scholarship came along. A couple of participants also pointed out administrative issues in receiving the funding.

In terms of supervision the academic supervisors were seen as being good and very useful in the provision of feedback. There were no reservations expressed by any of the participants about the level of academic supervision. However, the VET work supervisor does not really seem to have been used by any of the participants who were contacted, and this point was also raised by the program leader. Indeed, it would seem that they have never even met the supervisor, so it may be that this component of the program is not necessary.

Employer support has been problematic for some, although two participants are very happy with the level of support provided. A couple of participants mentioned that, while there is support in principle, this has to be balanced against work demands (for example, teaching), which has the highest priority. Hence the level of support is variable and an aspect of the program that is difficult to control. Nevertheless, this is an area that deserves further investigation.

Most considered that the workshop/forum associated with the program was useful. It was useful in terms of content and also in terms of being able to catch up with other participants to see what they are doing.

One of the possible weaknesses of this program is that by its very nature NCVER doesn't know when papers (to be published by NCVER) will be received. This seems to be somewhat outside NCVER's control. It may be that the program needs more time before an assessment of this component can be made. However, people interviewed at NCVER indicated that this is an area that needs to be addressed. One alternative would be to increase the funding to participants with an expectation that more papers would be written for NCVER to publish. Another alternative mentioned was to have only one scholarship each year that would attract a substantial stipend (about $20 000 per year) but which would entail quite a bit of material to be prepared for NCVER.

Comment was made that the program is fairly hands off (rather than tightly controlled). For a couple of participants this was seen as a good thing as it gave them flexibility. It is possible that others might like more direction but this did not emerge in the interviews.

NCVER fellowship scheme

The NCVER fellowship scheme had not generated the interest that was hoped for in the beginning, although at the time of this review a fellowship was in the final stages of negotiation. The program managers from the community of practice had cross-promoted the scheme without success, and in the end, NCVER itself was successful in identifying a candidate.

There were suggestions that NCVER consider forming alliances with one or more universities with a view to offering more substantial monies to undertake research using NCVER data. This could be in the form of a fellowship at the university or within NCVER itself.

NCVER senior managers interviewed were still interested in pursuing this type of scheme, but suggested being flexible in offering these fellowship opportunities and considering a range of disciplines, fields, and candidates from overseas as well as from Australia. NCVER is also developing other strategies to encourage greater use of its data, such as its education resources.

VET Researcher of the Year

This award had the least focus in the review as it is difficult to gather evidence on the effectiveness of the award and so make any definitive comments about it. However, the Managing Director at NCVER believes it to be a worthy initiative. This point of view was supported by others.

Gaining nominations of people suitable for the award has been difficult. In response to this, the guidelines for the award have been revised to allow researchers to self-nominate, as well as to nominate their best three papers for consideration by the selection panel (previously the panel had considered the nominees' most recent papers).

The award will now be associated with the No Frills conference (rather than the National Training Awards). This is line with its focus on recognising excellence in research.

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