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# 1 Introduction

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This is the report of two-year longitudinal study, ‘The Role of VET in Regional Australia’, which is funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). The study was conducted by research staff of the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia.

The overall aim of the project is to provide detailed information about what is occurring in the field of vocational education, training and learning in Australia’s regions. Stakeholders in VET consist of students, trainers, enterprises, industries, communities, regions, as well as the government partners such as local, State and Commonwealth bureaucracies and policy arms. The project seeks to throw light not only on the various ways in which VET contributes to the economic and social wellbeing of the regions, but how and why it achieves this. As a result, it shows ways in which VET’s impact on economic and social outcomes can be enhanced.

The purpose of the first year was to collect baseline data on the role of vocational education and training (VET) in a selection of regional communities and to identify issues for further study. The purpose of the second year was to identify features of configurations of VET that are effective in meeting the needs of the different stakeholders and communities. The diversity within and between regions which was found across the seven sites from the 1999 scoping phase of the study carried with it the implication that more should be known about regions in Australia so that VET responses and learning designs can be targeted most effectively. This has been addressed in the year 2000 *Role of VET* continuation study by inclusion of three new sites with different characteristics in terms of population mix, geography and industry.

The term ‘configurations’ was defined in the report on the 1999 phase of the study (CRLRA 2000) as the various combinations of human and physical resources that are brought together in particular ways to produce the VET outputs for a site. These configurations describe the key features of *learning communities* — the collective dynamic that promotes the local effectiveness of VET.

Building knowledge is a slow and systematic process and, as these case studies show, the dynamics of VET are multi-dimensional and ever-changing.



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## **2 Scope and definitions**

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### **2.1 Aims and research questions**

#### **2.1.1 Year 1999 aims**

The overall aim of the research in 1999 was to provide detailed information about what is occurring in the field of vocational education, training and learning in Australia's regions. The project sought to throw light not only on the various ways in which VET contributes to the economic and social wellbeing of the regions, but how it achieves this. As a result, it showed ways in which VET's impact on economic and social outcomes can be enhanced.

There were two specific aims of the project:

- to determine the nature of the contributions of vocational education and training to the social and economic wellbeing of communities in sites and communities within seven regions of Australia;
- to determine the ways in which those contributions come about with particular focus on the relationships and models of collaboration that exist among groups in the community.

#### **2.1.2 1999 research questions**

The 1999 research questions that address the above aims fall under three headings as follows:

##### ***Change***

1. What are the implications for vocational education and training of the changing nature of regional communities?

##### ***Impact of VET on the regions' social and economic needs***

2. What direct and indirect contributions does vocational education and training make to social and economic needs in regional communities?
3. What factors (internal and external to the community) influence the social and economic outcomes of vocational education and training in regional Australia?
4. To what extent does vocational education and training meet the social and economic needs of regional communities?

##### ***Effective collaboration and partnerships***

5. What are the different configurations of vocational education and training in regional communities?
6. What are effective models of collaboration between communities and their VET providers?

#### **2.1.3 Year 2000 aim**

The aim of the year 2000 research was to investigate the contribution of VET to regional Australia and identify features of configurations of VET that are effective in meeting the needs of different stakeholders and communities.

### 2.1.4 2000 research questions

The research articulated the aim as a set of seven specific research questions which are grouped under three headings:

#### ***Changes and context***

7. What are the changes in regional Australia over approximately the last five years in terms of:
  - Industry profiles
  - Employment demands – existing and emerging
  - Skills profiles
  - Levels of participation in education and training?
8. What are the key factors driving these changes (global, national, regional and local)?

#### ***Configurations***

9. What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?
10. How and why did the different configurations of VET provision emerge?
11. How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?

#### ***Effectiveness***

12. How effective are the different configurations of VET provision in meeting the needs of the stakeholders?
13. What actions should be taken to improve effectiveness of VET in meeting stakeholders' needs in various regions?

## 2.2 Definitions

**Adult and Community Education (ACE):** The ACE sector has a diverse set of program offerings which are focused on community education. Typically, the nonformal courses take place in Community Colleges (NSW), Neighbourhood Houses, in some TAFE institutes and through community groups in a range of community-based locations.

**Clients** in vocational education and training are defined as trainees and employers.

**Community** is defined as a small or large group of people in occasional or protracted interaction for the varying purposes which serve to confirm, consolidate, or extend the identities, values and knowledge shared by the group. There are five possible parameters around which a community may have its meaning defined:

- by size of community population alone
- by single versus multiple networks
- by conceptual relationship (function?) qualified by size or nature
- by the institutional or organisational boundedness of the population

- by geographic/locality/place boundedness as primary descriptor, then qualified

This report primarily uses community in the last sense, as being defined by the people's own concept of place. The reason for this is because we are dealing in this study with ten geographic regions and their geographic sub-communities consisting of towns and their surrounding countryside. However, readers need to be aware that the researchers agree entirely that these communities will themselves have other communities—including electronic communities, for example—which are defined by one of the other parameters outlined above.

**Community learning:** Kearns et al. 1999 (p. 160) describe community learning as any group that addresses its learning needs through pro-active partnerships, using learning as a way of promoting social cohesion, regeneration and economic development.

**Culture:** Culture refers to the groups of behaviours, manners, customs, norms and mores that define the distinctiveness of a group of people. The group could be as small as a clan, tribe or family, or as large as a workplace, a State or country. This definition of culture can be usefully supplemented by Cole and Engestrom (1993) in that it allows culturally defined value sets to be incorporated via the 'interactions' word:

[Culture]. . .is experienced in local, face-to-face interactions that are locally constrained and, hence, heterogeneous with respect to both 'culture as a whole' and the parts of the entire cultural toolkit experienced by any given individual (p. 15).

**Formal vocational education and training** is structured training and assessment which is intended to result in a qualification under the Australian Recognition Framework (formal VET).

**Group learning** When teams and small groups of people are engaged on a task, the learning that ensues can be referred to as group learning. Group learning fits in a hierarchy from individual, group, organisational and community learning. Some references are also made to regional learning and a learning society.

**Historicity and futuricity:** Often unconscious, but shown to be crucial for decision making and learning, the use of historical memories of places, people (their skills and personality characteristics), and the common resources of the community are drawn on in people's public, leisure and workplace interactions. These histories are vital in making decisions about future courses of action. Historical knowledge enables new knowledge and information to be contextualised and applied for future effective and strategic use.

**Informal vocational education and training** is training which occurs incidentally, as people go about their daily lives. It is not structured and not usually recognised as training.

**Learning community** is defined as a group of people, or a group of groups, who work together through active learning to achieve common goals *over time*. It displays a variety of interlinked activities occurring both vertically and horizontally across the various formal and informal networks within the community. The activities which are visible signs of a learning community will be identifiable as having in common the active pursuit of goals whose basis is some part of the understood shared values of that community. The purpose of such activities is to consolidate or extend the identities and knowledge (through learning) of some particular set of values shared by that group. It is this concept of a learning community that tends to distinguish a

partnership (see later definition of ‘VET partnerships’) from simply a group of people who are loosely linked but achieve little towards a common purpose.

**Lifelong learning** is now uniformly regarded as being of major significance for Australia’s responsiveness to future socioeconomic challenges (Kearns et al. 1999). The latter report provides the definition for lifelong learning assumed in this report:

Lifelong learning is a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments (p. viii).

Given the importance being placed on lifelong learning presently, it is significant that Dickie and Weeks (1999) report as some ‘concrete findings’ (p. 1) from their current research into the ANTA *National Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning*:

- Lifelong learning is fundamental to security and confidence in the knowledge economy.
- Australians place a high value on skills and learning, but not necessarily on education and training.

They also report on the importance of:

- the link between the global and the local
- a focus on networks and leadership (pp. 6–7).

**Nonformal vocational education and training** is training which is structured, but not intended to result in a qualification under the Australian Recognition Framework. Examples of nonformal VET include programs offered by Commonwealth and State departments of primary industry, adult and community education courses and first aid courses (not as part of an ARF qualification).

**OH&S:** Occupational health and safety.

**Organisational learning:** Japanese management professor Ikujiro Nonaka (1991) has captured the concept of organisational learning’s emerging reality:

In an economy where the only certainty is uncertainty, the one sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge. When markets shift, technologies proliferate, competitors multiply, and products become obsolete virtually overnight, successful companies are those that consistently create new knowledge, disseminate it widely throughout the organization, and quickly embody it in new technologies and products. These activities define the knowledge-creating company, whose sole business is continuous innovation (p. 96).

Organisational learning requires an organisational culture which seeks continuous improvement and creativity from everybody and which embraces change rather than fearing and seeking to minimise it. It embraces life-long learning as a strategic human resource management tool and stresses group rather than individual learning experiences. It means surfacing and re-examining all of those inarticulate assumptions about the organisation and its environment which, while never explicitly scrutinised or even acknowledged, drive much of what the organisation actually does. Organisational learning is about more than simply acquiring new knowledge and insights; it is also crucial to un-learn the old ones when they have outlived their relevance.

**Partnerships** consist of two or more people who work together in association on short- or long-term projects to achieve commonly held goals.

**Regional learning:** When the term ‘regional learning’ or ‘learning regions’ is used, it refers to the way clusters of communities learn during the individual and group activities that achieve the realisation of a common purpose.

**Self-efficacy:** Self-efficacy refers to a belief in one’s capability to execute the actions necessary to achieve a certain level of performance, and is an important influence on behaviour and affect, relating to individuals’ goal setting, effort expenditure, and levels of persistence. It involves an evaluation of one’s own ability to successfully execute behaviour to produce the outcome (Bandura, 1977, 1989, 1993).

**Social capital** is the networks, values (norms) and trust that builds from people's goodwill as they interact together.

**VET configuration** is the map of various providers of vocational education training and learning in a community, and how they relate to each other.

**VET partnerships** are the specific collaborative arrangements for various specific projects and purposes that have VET outcomes for the participants at community, regional and national levels, that exist in the community and that together make up the VET configuration.

**VET collaboration** is a generic term that refers to the processes undertaken in partnerships and configurations. In other words, partnerships are collaborations with a purpose and a defined set of outcomes.

**Vocational education and training (VET)** is the term used to include both formal and nonformal VET.

**Vocational learning** (Falk, 1998, p. 46) is a term used with increasing frequency to refer to the blend of learning processes, more focused on the individual and group’s experiences (rather than a system or systems outcomes orientation). Vocational learning is therefore more oriented to the demand-side and the processes involved, while ‘VET’ is more appropriate to describe the supply-side processes, structures and policies that support and endorse vocational learning. Both supply and demand processes, structures and policies are identified as important in identifying needs for VET, and related contributions of VET, as Dickie and Stewart Weeks (1999) also note. Supply and demand sides need to be regarded as reciprocal and compatible if resources and needs are to be maximised and met in whatever kind of learning occurs in the pursuit of vocational outcomes.

### **2.3 Scope of consolidation report**

This report draws to a conclusion research conducted by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia since 1999 on the Role of Vocational Education and Training in Regional Australia. Previous reports have reported on progress and initial results.

### **2.3.1 Previous reports**

#### ***February 2000***

The first year of the longitudinal study began in 1999 with seven sites across the nation. The full report on this research is to be found in *Managing Change through VET: The role of vocational education and training in regional Australia* (CRLRA 2000).

#### ***May 2000 interim report***

The Interim Report presents a synthesis of the relevant literature, the background statistical material for the ten sites and additional information from the 1999 project data as specified in the contract between ANTA and CRLRA.

#### ***October 2000 progress report***

The Progress Report presents a synthesis of the Interim Report's literature review outcomes, site-by-site profiles of the original seven sites, site-by-site profiles of the three new sites, analysis of questionnaire items on an item-by-item basis and preliminary findings as possible from the initial data analyses to September 2000.

#### ***January 2001***

The January 2001 report presents a set of ten case studies from each of the study sites that selectively highlight issues arising out of the research. The report includes a synthesis of the research results in terms of three broad issues: diversity, collaboration and flexible delivery. The report concludes with a series of findings and implications for actions.

### **2.3.2 Current report**

The current report is divided into two main sections. Volume 1 presents a review of literature to 2001, a review of methodology over the whole research period, a summary of results across all ten sites, a review of change drivers that affect the sites, a discussion of the results and conclusions and implications based on the framework of measurement used and issues arising out of the research. Volume 2 includes a detailed case study of each site including contextual information about the sites, a summary of process issues pertinent to each site and a review of outcomes of VET for each site with a section that identifies opportunities for improvement within the site.

This consolidation report aims to draw together the results of all aspects of the research drawing on the full range of face to face interviews, questionnaires, telephone surveys and background data collected during the data collection period. A particular emphasis of this report is to ensure that any findings or implications come directly out of the research from the ten case study sites. Literature reviewed will be used to support methodology and where appropriate the outcomes of the research.

The conclusion of this report does not attempt to make recommendations for action. The conclusions do not attempt to generalise implications that may arise to extend beyond the ten sites used in the research.