

The positioning of practitioners in Vocational Education and Training research

Lauri Grace, PhD candidate, Faculty of Education, Deakin University

Abstract

What is the status and role of research in VET reform? How are the views of practitioners positioned in VET research and reform? What access do VET practitioners have to research that empowers them to critique current policy and practice? This paper explores these questions drawing on literature and also on my experience as a VET practitioner and researcher. The national VET research strategy supports a substantial research effort to inform policy and practice. However, in a complex and unstable VET environment, funded research focuses on implementation, rather than critique, of current directions. I argue that the complexity of the VET system gives rise to new research problems, and that VET practitioners have knowledge and insight to offer in exploring these problems. But I question the extent to which current VET consultation and research processes incorporate the views of practitioners. I illustrate these issues by providing a brief overview of my PhD research project, currently being conducted through the Faculty of Education, Deakin University. This project explores the proposition that the language form typically used in official national VET texts is representative of, and constructive in, unequal power relationships.

Executive summary / Introduction

The complexity of the Australian VET sector, and the political and economic environment in which it operates, gives rise to new research problems but at the same time makes it difficult for researchers located outside VET to understand the sector they are researching. VET practitioners have insight and expertise to offer in exploring emerging research questions, but there are a number of constraints on practitioners, both as users of research and as researchers themselves. This paper presents a brief discussion of the role and status of research in VET policy and practice. Since the early days of the National Training Reform Agenda, policy development within VET has been criticised for the absence of a strong research base. While there have been significant increases in government funding for VET research since the early 1990s, criticism remains that funded research is closely aligned to existing government policy, and that the purpose of much research is to inform the implementation of policy rather than to challenge or critique the directions being taken. As a result, VET practitioners as users of research have access to a limited range of options to draw on in theorising and critiquing aspects of VET practice in response to emerging research questions. There are a number of avenues for VET practitioners to participate in and undertake research. These include: participate in VET consultation processes; undertake local action research / action learning projects with funding from one of a number of government programs; participate in collaborative research projects conducted by universities in conjunction with VET organisations; or undertake a program of postgraduate study by research or project. The paper briefly looks at each of these avenues and outlines the benefits and constraints of each.

What is VET?

Vocational Education and Training (VET), Schools, Higher Education, and Adult and Community Education (ACE), are the four sectors of the Australian education system (Gibb 2003). Vocational education and training can be broadly defined as post-compulsory education and training which provides occupational or work-related knowledge and skills (Knight & Nestor 2000, p.42; Australian National Training Authority 2003, p.2). Formal VET qualifications range from Certificate I to Advanced Diploma (Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board 2002, p.1).

To issue VET qualifications, a provider must be a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and comply with the standards of the Australian Quality Training Framework (*Australian Quality Training Framework Standards* 2001, p. 2). The more than 4000 RTOs listed on the national training database (Smith & Keating 2003, p.77) include publicly funded TAFE colleges, private training organisations, industry bodies, and individual enterprises. There are no reliable figures on the overall level of VET activity. In a VET system in which participation can be publicly or privately funded, national data are only kept for publicly funded activity. These figures show that more than one in ten Australians participated in publicly funded VET programs during 2002 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2003).

While the historical roots of VET lie in technical education, which has a documented history beginning in the 1800s (Murray-Smith 1965, p.172), the regulatory framework of the contemporary VET sector is less than 20 years old. Under the Australian Constitution, education is a state responsibility. In the late 1980s federal, state and territory governments began introducing a series of policy developments that collectively became known as the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA). These policy developments included the adoption of competency-based training against nationally defined standards, and the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) (Stevenson 1993; Butterworth 1994). Subsequent manifestations of VET reform included the National Training Framework (NTF) in 1996, and the 'fully integrated national VET system' in 2000 (Mitchell and Young 2001, p.5). This ongoing process of change has been described as an effort 'to integrate all forms of work-related learning (public and private, formal and informal, structured and unstructured) into a coherent and unified VET system' (Chappell 2003, p.25).

Key elements of the VET regulatory framework are Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). More than 70 industry Training Packages have been endorsed (ANTA 2002, p.2). Training Packages are not, as the name might suggest, materials to support training and learning. They are sets of 'assessable outcomes' (ANTA 2002, p.2), and it is the responsibility of individual RTOs to provide learning materials which support training programs designed to achieve these outcomes. The AQTF is a set of compliance standards developed to 'provide the basis for a nationally consistent, high quality vocational education and training system' (*AQTF Standards* 2001, p.1). The AQTF incorporates two sets of standards – one for RTOs and one for the state and territory bodies responsible for registering and monitoring RTOs.

The regulatory framework of the VET sector is comprised of a complex of organised practices which control activities conducted in technical education and workplace training. The framework has been substantially created through a process of generating texts that construct the VET sector as a site of action. Key VET texts such as Training Packages and the AQTF take activities at the level of the local and particular and transcribe them into abstract and generalised forms, as extra-local texts that are authorised to mediate action (Jackson 1995). Jackson argued that 'competency-based curriculum measures constitute a textual method of 'knowing' and 'deciding' which is formalized, [and] abstracted from the intentions of particular individuals' (p.178). In the Australian VET sector, Training Package competency standards are a textually based, abstract and generalised representation of the knowledge skills and attitudes needed to perform at the local level in an industry workplace. Similarly, the AQTF standards for RTOs are an abstract and generalised compliance standard against which the local practices of individual RTOs and VET practitioners are subject to formal audit. Jackson described the development of competency-based curriculum as introducing:

... a textual mode of action which obscures the presence of individual employers, instructors, and students as the living subjects of the instructional

process. Their presence is displaced by an objectified system of curriculum planning and implementation in which documents replace individuals as constituents of social action (Jackson 1995, p.166).

The complexity of the VET system, and the history of ongoing change which impacts on the work of VET practitioners, gives rise to new research problems 'that are of a different order than those that have been the primary focus of much VET research' (Chappell 2003 p.30). These problems, and the challenges they present for VET researchers, highlight a need for 'new models and theoretical approaches to [VET] research' (Kell 2001, p.1). VET practitioners have a key role to play in addressing these new research problems, providing they are not confined to research practices and methodologies defined by the established policy context of the VET sector.

Critiques of research within VET

The VET literature reveals an ongoing debate about the status and role of research in the overall VET reform process. On one hand, Smith (2003, p.vii) argued that government funding has created a 'world class VET research capacity', and as a result 'the VET sector in Australia is more effectively supported by relevant research than either the school or higher education sectors'. In contrast it has been argued that not only has the VET 'reform' process not been supported by a strong research base (Butterworth 1994), but that VET research is subject to political interference (Kell 2001).

Butterworth (1994, p.33) argued that the NTRA reforms which 'convulsed' the VET sector in the late 1980s took place 'largely in a research vacuum', and described the VET sector at that time as being dependent instead on 'anecdote, hearsay and gut feeling'. In response to the 1993 report *No Small Change* (McDonald et al. 1993, cited in Chappell 2003) a national VET research strategy was introduced, accompanied by a substantial increase in VET research funding. This national strategy and research funding supported the development of a substantial body of VET research, much of which is applied research aligned to current government priorities and designed to improve policies and practice in VET (Chappell 2003, pp.23-24). In contrast to the absence of research underpinning the early VET reforms, priority areas identified under the National VET Research and Evaluation Program now lead to research projects designed to support the achievement of national VET goals (Dawe 2003, p.4). In the current VET policy environment, research is expected to be immediately useful in addressing government needs, and the role of researchers has been described as almost that of policy consultants (Kell 2001, pp.5-6).

In the 'contested nature' of the 'dynamic, turbulent and demanding' VET environment (Selby Smith 2000, p.5), this approach to research has been challenged. Kell (2001, pp.3-4) described the NTRA as 'instrumental and interventionist', and criticised the close alignment between VET research and the NTRA reforms. Kell argued for a strong critique of developments in VET, but expressed concern that such a critique is unlikely to be achieved when government funded research is closely aligned to current policy (p.4). Kell described the current VET research environment as:

A highly risky politicised research environment characterised by high levels of political interference, vetting and sanitising. Research has increasingly been used as part of state 'image management' and as an instrument of government. The notion that publicly funded research is essentially part of the democratic process of informing citizens seems to be an unpopular notion, with bureaucrats and politicians anxious to avoid any criticisms of government performance (Kell 2001, p.3).

Such concerns are not new. During the early years of the NTRA Stevenson (1993, pp.88-95) argued that the government used official discourse to 'impede debate' about the VET reform

process, with the result that 'criticism and other research are often labelled irrelevant, or out of touch, or too 'academic'. That is, they are constructed as 'other', thus rendering such critique without any value in the current educational debate'.

Examples of resistance to research which criticises current policy are found in the VET literature on a range of topics. The adoption of competency based training (CBT) as the only curriculum strategy to be used within VET was criticised for ignoring a 'vast body of literature' (McBeath 1997, p.38), and 'many cogent critiques' of the competency framework (Jackson 1993, p.46). Butler and Ferrier (2000, p.6) reviewed VET gender equity literature in the period 1987-1998, and found that much of this research was 'designed to 'inform' or support policy implementation, more than to shape, challenge or transform policy'. They found that very few reports represented a direct challenge to gender-based power structures, many projects worked within funding guidelines which provided little scope to influence decision-making, and reports by activists and academics were on the 'very margins' of influence (pp.70-71). In their review of VET research on literacy and numeracy, Falk and Millar noted that the practical manifestations of critical-cultural approaches to language did not seem to be as prevalent as the practical manifestations of research informed by basic skills, growth and heritage or 'whole language' approaches (Falk & Millar, 2001 p.2). Docking (1997, p.4) reviewed the research on assessment in VET and identified two bodies of literature: 'anecdotal studies' and 'conceptual studies'. Docking described 'anecdotal studies' as being 'context bound', and noted that they tended to focus on practical approaches and issues and rarely validated their positions by reference to other studies. 'Conceptual studies' were described as being 'concept bound' and used anecdotal material to support a theoretical position. Having identified these two bodies of research, Docking noted that the impact on practice of the 'conceptual' or more theoretical literature was 'erratic'. Selby Smith (2000) compared the impact of research initiated by users such as VET policy making bodies, to the impact of research initiated by researchers, and concluded that research initiated by researchers 'may be less immediately visible to decision-makers; less easy to incorporate appropriately in decision-making processes; and perhaps more likely to challenge established ways of thinking or acting' (p.1).

Kell (2001, p.6) identified a 'temptation towards suppression' in funded VET research, arguing that when funded research projects do question fundamental issues in VET they experience tension about how to do this in ways acceptable to the funding body or government. This may be an important consideration for researchers: Robertson (1999) argued that including research findings critical of current practice or recommending changes to VET systemic arrangements would result in a research report being perceived as a 'negative report'. Funding body response to such a report included strategies such as withholding the report from publication, or editing it to remove the 'negative' aspects. Butler and Ferrier (2000) also identified the practice of funding bodies embargoing, shelving, or not publishing reports arising from funded equity research projects. Fooks (1997, cited in Hawke & Cornford 1998) even suggested that in some cases funding bodies responded to research outcomes that did not match their agenda by commissioning further research in pursuit of more acceptable results.

The impact of the VET sector's resistance to critical research is not limited to policy makers alone. Clayton (1999) argued that for research to be useful to VET practitioners, practitioners need to be aware of the existence of the research findings and to see them as valuable. If the research acknowledged as useful to VET is limited to research which supports current policy and practice, then practitioners at the front line of VET will have access to a limited range of options to inform their own response to issues they encounter in their daily practice.

The implications of a research strategy that focuses on implementation of current policy and resists critiquing that policy should not be underestimated. Selby Smith (2000) argued that the impact of research and development on decision making is complex, and rather than a 1:1

relationship between individual research studies and decision making, decisions can be influenced by an accumulation of research over time. 'Research contributes to the reservoir of knowledge, which can assist decision-making in the future' (Selby Smith 2000, p.5). On a related point, Robertson (1999) argued that the non-publication or editing of 'negative reports' has an iterative effect on the literature review component of subsequent research projects, with the result that these literature reviews come to reflect the original research findings 'less and less'. If indeed it is an accumulation of research that has an impact on decision making, then it is a concern that the official response to critical research limits the 'reservoir of knowledge' within VET largely to research findings that align to current policy.

Positioning the VET practitioner in VET research

How are the views of the practitioners positioned within this overall VET research environment? The first step in addressing this question is to briefly discuss who the 'practitioners' in VET are. Once again, the complexity of the VET sector is an issue, and defining the role of a VET practitioner is not as easy as defining the role of a teacher (Smith & Keating 2003, p.230).

Smith and Keating (2003, p.230) estimated that there may be as many as 390,000 people working in VET teaching and training. VET practitioners have been described as 'a disparate body' which cannot be considered homogeneous (Clayton 1999, p.1). The role of VET practitioner can be widely diverse, incorporating such specific roles as manager, administrator, teacher, trainer, assessor, in-house enterprise trainer, individual training consultant, and operational team leader or supervisor with some training responsibility. VET practitioners may work in publicly funded institutions such as TAFE colleges, ACE providers, schools and universities, or in private or commercial organisations such as private colleges and RTOs, industry bodies, or individual enterprises (Chappell 2003; Down 2003; Melville 2003). They may be involved in a variety of learning environments including on the job, classroom, face-to-face, online and distance learning (Chappell 2003, p.25). Smith and Keating (2003, p.230) also noted that many VET practitioners move confidently across a range of roles and contexts. This diversity of roles was illustrated by one research project which described the 'varied and extensive' industrial and professional experience identified within a group of just nine VET practitioners:

It included experience in relevant industries, in teaching, and in teaching and learning management. Such experience had been gained in a range of public, private, corporate and commercial enterprises. Types of experience included policy advice, national examination and moderation (overseas), workplace assessment and training, self-employment, conduct of research and the development of strategic future research directions, organisational learning and curriculum development. (Melville 2003, p. 3)

This experience and expertise in a diverse range of roles and contexts should equip VET practitioners to make a valuable contribution to VET research and policy development. Down (2003, p.18) argued that VET practitioners have knowledge and insight into the impact of policy changes on their work, and that practitioner knowledge is part of the 'collective wisdom' of VET. This paper will briefly look at two ways in which VET policy developers can draw on this knowledge, insight and 'wisdom': by involving VET practitioners as participants in official consultation processes or VET research projects, or by involving them as researchers.

VET practitioners as research / consultation participants

One strategy for VET practitioners to contribute to research is by participating in funded research projects or in official 'consultation' processes. While it is arguable whether consultation processes can be considered research, they are one of the tools used to inform VET policy development. Extensive government rhetoric about consultation and

collaboration in VET decision making (see, for example, Mitchell & Young 2001, pp.7-8), stands in contrast to claims that innovation in VET is in fact 'technological, top down, authority based and prescriptive' (McBeath 1997, p.37). It has been argued that the perspectives privileged in VET reform were those of government, industry and the union movement (Stevenson 1993; Hawke & Cornford 1998), while consultation with educational experts, VET practitioners and the wider community was limited (Mawer & Field 1995). Hawke and Cornford (1998, p.129) described a 'succession of policy changes' that:

...usually have appeared 'out of the blue' as policy-makers and others have developed their policies well away from the eyes and ears of those who will be called upon to implement them. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a culture of secrecy has come to characterise VET policy-making in Australia.

Chappell (1996, p.31) identified a number of inherent contradictions in the assumptions underpinning the VET reform process, and argued that VET practitioners 'must not only be able to identify the paradigmatic assumptions that underpin the curriculum and pedagogical practices of their particular vocational area, but also re-examine their personal 'theories-in-use''. Instead, VET practitioners were made 'bystanders' and 'implementers' in the VET reform process (Stevenson 1993, p.88), and were disenfranchised from many aspects of their professional role (Kell 2001, p.6). Jackson, (1995, p.165) described competency-based curriculum reform as a 'crisis of governance in education', and described how the authority of instructors to make curriculum decisions based on their professional knowledge is subordinated and displaced through a process in which documented competency standards become the only authorised basis for curriculum decision making. Jackson (p.169) argued that in CBT systems competency documents are seen as being objective, while practitioner perspectives are characterised as reflecting 'vested interests'.

The VET consultation process is typically structured in a way that limits the extent to which practitioner concerns and issues are identified and incorporated. This may, in part, be a consequence of the difficulty of consulting with a wide range of stakeholders across a system as diverse and complex as the Australian VET sector. The 'clients' of VET include government, industry, enterprises, training organisations, individual learners, and local communities, and tensions inevitably arise when the VET sector attempts to meet the different and sometimes conflicting needs and expectations of this range of clients (Chappell, Hawke et al. 2003, p.vii). As noted above, within this diverse range of VET stakeholders there is also considerable diversity amongst VET practitioners themselves. This diversity in roles is reflected in a diversity of purposes, values, practices, beliefs, identities, and organisational norms and cultures, resulting in what Down (2003, p.13) described as 'multi-voicedness'. To these tensions and contradictions add the complexity of a federal system based on government agreements, with multiple layers of decision making and widely varying practices, and the result is 'a very dynamic system' which is 'inherently unstable' (Smith & Keating 2003, p.51).

This presents a significant challenge for consultation processes seeking to achieve consensus or researchers seeking to incorporate VET practitioner perspectives in their research. These attempts are confronted with many voices, often with quite different views (Chappell 2003; Harris & Simons 2003). In addition, it has been argued that participating in activities such as surveys, focus groups and interviews requires access to time and resources which may limit the range of stakeholders who are able to participate (Robertson 1999). In the case of VET practitioners, participation in research or consultations is often unfunded, leaving individuals with the responsibility to undertake these activities in their own time.

As a practitioner who has participated in various VET consultation processes over the years, my personal experience reflects the issues raised in the literature. In response to the size, complexity, internal tensions and contradictory expectations of the sector, VET consultations

tend to follow a structure which enables them to manage the range and volume of input. A typical structure may include a literature review, development of discussion paper/s, a series of face-to-face consultations, and opportunities for email and online input. Face-to-face consultations often include some focus group component, with an agenda which generally includes opening presentation by the facilitator, participant discussion of a number of predefined points and questions, and a final summing up by the facilitator. Only a portion of the overall time allocation is available for participant input, and this time is frequently allocated to small group discussion, with input being distilled by a process of selecting key points to be reported back from each small group. Under this structure, VET practitioners and others are allocated a brief period in which to discuss questions and issues determined in advance by the organisers of the consultation process. The structure does not provide an opportunity for VET practitioners, clients and other stakeholders to provide open feedback about the issues in question. Resistance to the formal structure emerges in various forms. For example, participants sometimes challenge the restrictive structure of such sessions, or they act to take back some control by breaking away from the planned agenda and raising their own issues rather than confining their input to the points identified by the consultation organisers. Whether or not these additional issues are reflected in the final report is determined by the consultation facilitators.

The recent High Level Review of Training Packages provides an example of a consultation based on this structure. The terms of reference of the High Level Review acknowledged that Training Packages represent a major change in VET practice, they noted that 'time and time again' client and stakeholder expectations have not been met, and they stated that 'the reservoir of goodwill seems to be in danger of running dry' (Schofield & McDonald 2003, p.4). And yet the focus of the review itself was on enhancements to the Training Package model and related implementation issues. As a participant in this consultation it was made clear that the Training Package model itself was not being reconsidered as part of the review process. Within the face-to-face consultation session in which I participated, only 30 minutes of a two-hour session was available for participant discussion in small groups, with two key points being reported back from each small group. This was a major review of one of the key elements of the VET regulatory framework, but I suggest that the typical structure of VET consultations limits the opportunity to top up 'the reservoir of goodwill'.

Quite how a system as diverse and complex as VET can provide opportunities for genuine input from practitioners and others at the front line is unclear. That it claims to do so but often fails is reflected in a level of cynicism which I observe at practitioner level within VET. I believe there is a need for further research into the efficacy of the consultation arrangements used in VET and the impact that VET practitioner input to consultations has on VET policy and practice.

VET practitioners as researchers

The changes implemented in the VET reform process have had a significant impact on the work of VET practitioners, and Chappell (2003, p.1) argued that 'far from being 'neutral conduits' through which training reforms flow unhindered, VET practitioners act and respond in various ways to the changes they are experiencing'. After reviewing a number of case studies of VET research Selby Smith (2000, p.5) concluded that much research and development is undertaken at the level of VET providers and practitioners, and the impact of this research on local level decision making is significant. Research conducted at this level takes a variety of forms, including project activities supported by funding from programs such as Framing / Reframing the Future and Learnscope. While these activities are not specifically research oriented, they can merge research and teaching (Kell 2001). The evaluation of the professional development program Learnscope found that projects designed to address very practical issues also empowered the practitioners involved to influence strategic discussion and change at a high level within their organisations (Learning from Learnscope 2003).

Practitioner involvement is not limited to local level research. Dawe (2003, p.4) noted that collaborative projects involving research teams that include VET practitioners are becoming more common under the National VET Research and Evaluation program. Gibb (2003, p.5) examined research funding over a 3-year period and reported that 49% of projects were university-based, 14% were TAFE-based, 24% were conducted by private consultants, and 10% involved collaboration between universities and VET. The collaborative approach potentially offers significant benefits. Smith and Keating (2003, p.3) argued that the complexity of the VET sector means that it is not well understood by people working in higher education. Collaborative research projects which include VET practitioners can draw on the expertise and insight that these practitioners have in relation to VET issues. In turn, such collaborative arrangements have potential to 'legitimate and theorise the workplace knowledge of practitioners' (Kell 2001, p.7). Another potential benefit of collaborative research may be its contribution to developing a unified identity between researchers in higher education and VET. The membership of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) includes VET practitioners as well as researchers based in universities, the VET system, and industry (Chappell 2003, pp.23-24). But Kell (2001, p.6) argued that the practice of university researchers and consultants conducting research 'on' VET practitioners has had a 'divisive and corrosive impact' on relationships between researchers in these sectors.

Melville (2003) reported on one collaborative research project which involved TAFE practitioners as Research Associates. Not only did the project explore the impact that changes in VET had on the practitioners' work, it also explored the TAFE practitioners' experience as researchers involved in a project that explored their own practice. When the TAFE practitioners reflected on their experience as Research Associates, the benefits they identified included an improved understanding of the wider agenda of teaching / training, being exposed to different ideas and perspectives, sharing knowledge among staff, and participating in ongoing discussions about the research questions (Melville 2003, pp.5-8). Key constraints identified by the practitioner researchers included the difficulty in getting others to understand the importance of the project and make a commitment to participate, particularly when research was seen as a peripheral activity rather than core business. Time constraints were also an issue:

'In today's climate most people have a commitment level to work at 110%. Taking on a research project usually comes on top of the 110% and we can't keep on doing this.' (Melville 2003, p.7).

Time and financial constraints limited the role of the VET practitioner Associate Researchers to planning the research process, developing interview questions and the survey instrument, and gathering data. One practitioner / researcher commented:

'For me collecting but not being involved in the analysis of the data was difficult ... I like to be involved in seeing what is coming out of the data' (p.7).

As a practitioner I would concur with this sentiment. If part of the objective of collaborative research is to draw on the expertise and insight of the VET practitioners, it would seem that involving them in data gathering but not in data analysis might limit the extent to which that objective can be achieved.

Another avenue for VET practitioners to take on the role of researcher is through the increasingly popular professional doctorates or higher degree by project programs (Kell 2001; Brown & Hodges 2003). Brown and Hodges (pp.3-4) identified a number of advantages in this approach: higher degree by project programs provide an opportunity for practitioners to research their own practice in ways that are not generally available within VET, and being

located in higher education offers a 'creative space' for critique plus access to resources that may not otherwise be available. In contrast to the 'highly theorised dissertation' produced by traditional academic research, which may not align with VET practitioners' primary concerns, higher degree by project research was described as 'thoughtful, strategic, reflexive and eclectic' (Brown & Hodges pp.1-2). Kell (2001, pp.6-7) argued that practitioners doing higher degrees by project can theorise aspects of their practice and the impact of change, and can also theorise the power relationships within which they work, giving such programs 'the potential to reshape power relationships surrounding knowledge'.

While I acknowledge that higher degree by project programs offer VET practitioners opportunities to critique VET policy and practice, my own experience suggests that VET sector tensions have potential even in this context to subtly constrain practitioners' freedom to explore fundamental issues. In cases where a VET practitioner's higher degree study is funded by their RTO employer, there can be pressure for the study to focus on research questions identified by the employer rather than those identified by the practitioner. Regardless of whether the employing RTO provides financial support for the study, permission to use organisational information may be conditional on a copy of any completed papers being provided to RTO management. In a highly competitive and increasingly compliance focused VET sector, VET practitioners critiquing local practice may be confronted with the same tensions as occur in other forms of VET research (Kell 2001, p.6) – how to present critiques in ways that will not jeopardise their relationship with their employer. Brown and Hodges (2003, p.4) noted that 'the context of the workplace usually requires extensive negotiations that lead to the compromising of ideals. This can be the cost of relevance and current utility of findings.' However, with some planning before workplace negotiations commence it is possible for VET practitioners to minimise the extent to which relevance and utility of findings is allowed to constrain their freedom to critique policy and practice.

My experience as a VET practitioner involved in research

I was employed as an in-house training and development officer prior to the introduction of the National Training Reform Agenda. My experience as a VET practitioner involved in delivery and assessment of training includes working as a consultant for private and industry-based RTOs, a TAFE teacher and open learning tutor, and a lecturer for a Group Training Organisation. My experience as a VET practitioner involved in research includes participating in official VET consultation processes and also in funded research projects, facilitating 'action learning / action research' projects for an RTO-based VET research unit, and gathering data as a member of a collaborative VET / higher education project team. I have also completed a Masters program through coursework and research, and am currently undertaking a full-time PhD research project. My experience in this range of roles reflects the issues identified in the literature and discussed in this paper. As a practitioner I am sometimes overwhelmed by the volume of research reports, policy statements and procedural guidelines that I am required to read. Yet this material invariably supports current policy and practice except in those cases where an official change in direction is being put forward. I have, at times, been bewildered on reading the outcomes of consultations where I was a participant and finding that views strongly voiced by VET practitioners have not been acknowledged in the final report. I have facilitated a number of 'action research / action learning' projects which produced valuable results to support implementation of current policy, and had a clear impact on local level decision making. And I have completed a higher degree by coursework and research, doing a careful balancing act between critiquing local practice and avoiding the disapproval of my employers.

My doctoral research project (a work in progress) explores issues of language and power in VET. I am focusing on the way language is used in national Training Packages and related official VET texts such as the AQTF, and the impact this language has when these texts are

used to support workplace learning and assessment. I am exploring the proposition that the language form typically used in these texts is representative of, and constructive in, unequal power relationships within VET. This project emerges from a growing sense of disquiet that I have experienced as a practitioner in the VET sector. One of the trends apparent in the early policy statements and related texts of the NTRA was that VET reform was accompanied by the introduction and development of its own language form, characterised by complexity, ambiguity, passive voice, abstractions and jargon. In my work as a VET practitioner I have regularly observed cases where this language form acted as an insurmountable barrier to training participants. When my training participants talked about their experience of this language they talked about issues of power, identity and exclusion. Yet the approaches offered to me through VET literature or in discussion with VET managers and policy makers were silent on these issues. The VET response generally argued that the barriers I was observing arose because the people I was working with had low literacy levels and limited language skills. In the official view, language was not seen as constructing identities or power relationships, it was presented as a neutral medium used to convey content and meaning. In this approach, the language form used in official VET texts was generally not open to challenge or analysis.

The VET literature on language and literacy does include research informed by critical-cultural theory, and this body of literature addresses issues of power (Falk & Millar, 2001). While the 'critical-cultural' literature on language is on the public record, in my experience VET practitioners at the front line are largely not aware of its existence. Even as a practitioner with a keen interest in the power issues associated with language use in VET, I had no exposure to this research. As with critical research on other questions in VET, critical-cultural approaches to language play a limited role in informing VET debates.

It was not until I stepped out of my role as VET practitioner and took on the role of full-time researcher, with access to the guidance and resources available in higher education, that I was introduced to a wide range of literature I had never previously encountered. The literature informed by 'critical-cultural' approaches to language (for example: Heath 1983; Fairclough 1989; Gee 1996; Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996) enables me to explore the issues of power, identity and exclusion that my training participants raised when they talked about the language of VET. The literature informed by Smith's institutional ethnography and concepts of 'ruling relations' and 'bifurcated consciousness' (for example: Smith 1987, 1999; Jackson 1993, 1995; Spence 2002; Campbell 2003) provides an approach to social scientific enquiry which enables me to discover and critique the ruling relations of VET as they come into view from particular local sites. My research project is not practitioner research in the sense of a practitioner researching my own practice (Jarvis 1999, cited in Brown & Hodges 2003). It is a project that addresses a new research question that arises directly from my experience as a practitioner. The starting point for my research into language and power in VET is my 'sense of problem, of something going on, some disquiet, and of something here that could be explicated' (Smith 1999, p.9).

Conclusion

The Australian VET sector is complex and diverse, and tensions arise from the different and sometimes contradictory expectations of a wide range of stakeholders. The complexity of VET, combined with the impact of ongoing change, gives rise to new research questions. Yet research in VET is generally aligned to current policy, and critical research is resisted or disregarded. VET practitioners are themselves a diverse group and they have insight, knowledge and expertise to offer in policy development and also in responding to emerging research problems. But there are questions about how effectively existing processes within VET are able to draw on the contribution VET practitioners could make. The tendency of VET to resist critical research can result in practitioners having limited access to research findings and approaches that would empower them to challenge existing policy directions. In

addition, the local level knowledge of practitioners is sometimes constructed as representing vested interests, in contrast to authorised texts such as Training Packages and the AQTF which are seen as objective and which form the basis of the VET regulatory framework. This is a significant challenge for VET research. Options to meet to this challenge may include increased use of collaborative research teams which include VET practitioners and higher education researchers, or greater opportunity and encouragement for VET practitioners to undertake higher degree programs – either by project or by traditional research pathways. Both these options have the benefit of combining the insight and knowledge held by VET practitioners at the level of the local and particular, with the resources, guidance and access to critical theoretical frameworks available through higher education.

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