Getting the message out: disseminating the products of the national managed research and evaluation program

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Previous reviews of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) research effort (e.g. McDonald et al. 1993) have noted the need for development of what has been called a 'research culture' in VET, and that one of the key first steps in achieving this will be the effective dissemination of research. They argue "there is a clear need for fresh ways of disseminating the fruits of vocational education and training research and development so that they become more relevant to, and are seen to be more relevant to, the needs of practitioners and policymakers (McDonald et al. 1993)."

A nationally-funded project on the impact of VET research on decision making and policy formulation has noted that there is no linear relationship between these various factors. However research may be used by, and have some degree of influence over, the views, practices and policies of VET stakeholders. This report (Selby Smith et al. in press) notes the need for a web of linkages between those conducting research and the various groups who make use of the research they produce. It has therefore been acknowledged that, in the past, the outcomes of VET's research and evaluation program have not always been available to key shareholder groups in forms that are useful to them. However, the national research and evaluation strategy (NCVER 1997) aims to put stakeholders first and design approaches to the dissemination of research outcomes which best meet their various and varying information needs.

The capture of current and past VET research and the dissemination of the findings so that the research is more visible and potentially useful are key components of the national research and evaluation strategy for vocational education and training in Australia. This strategy advises both the national managed program administered by the NCVER and the NCVER's own core research.

In the past the great majority of research funds available have been spent on "doing" VET research. Under the strategy the majority of funds will still be spent on doing research; however a greatly increased proportion will be spent on disseminating the primary products of research as well as developing and disseminating a variety of derived products. In such cases the outcomes and findings of a range of projects are combined and summarised in order to target the needs of specific shareholder groups.

This background paper will: outline the objectives and underpinning principles of the dissemination approach; briefly describe the range of approaches proposed; and provide some information about how the dissemination approach will be implemented.

The dissemination - objectives and principles

The dissemination approach has four broad objectives. These are:

• Better design of products and services based on stakeholder requirements;
• Better utilisation of the products and services provided under the auspices of the strategy and for its different stakeholders;
• Improved accessibility to research and evaluation information for all stakeholders; and
• Increased visibility of research and evaluation information, with the consequent increase in the extent to which such information is used.

The dissemination approach being adopted by NCVER has three important underpinning principles:
• A clear understanding of who the stakeholders are in the overall research and evaluation program. The dissemination approach needs to recognise that individual priorities and projects will be important to different stakeholders, and even different subgroups within the broader categories of stakeholders. Therefore, the ways in which these stakeholders like to receive this information needs to be clearly understood and catered for when dissemination is being planned. In short the dissemination process must be stakeholder focussed.

• The variety of stakeholders, their various information needs and preferred ways of receiving information potentially require a wide range of products and services to be developed. Thus the dissemination approach for the strategy could be said to occupy a range of specific and carefully identified stakeholder “markets”. The dissemination approaches chosen need to be carefully planned to obtain an appropriate balance between the costs of producing them and the extent to which they are taken up and used by the intended stakeholder groups.

• The variety of stakeholders and products will require the development of a supporting production and dissemination infrastructure drawn both from within and outside the NCVER. This infrastructure must also make best use of the dissemination arrangements controlled by the stakeholder groups themselves.

Figure 1 overleaf outlines the marketing components of an approach to dissemination. They involve:

• the primary audiences (or stakeholders) and their information needs. These are fundamentally the same as those outlined in the national research and evaluation strategy (see appendix 1);

• the mechanisms through which information is generated, including both the managed national program of research and evaluation work and the NCVER’s own in-house program. Both of these are advised by the strategy and its associated workplan prepared for the National Research and Evaluation Committee (NREC). Research conducted or funded by other players may also feed in and be incorporated within the dissemination framework - and this is where the need for a strong support of the VOCED database by researchers comes in!

• a set of primary products, arising from the research approaches adopted (usually reports, academic papers or other articles) and a range of derived products and services which involve analysing, targeting, reworking, simplifying and synthesising the primary research products. It may also involve using a variety of different authors and media. These products and services are tailored to meet the needs of stakeholders. In this way NCVER, in collaboration with researchers and other individuals and groups, is acting very much in the brokerage role described by Selby Smith et al. (in press). To that end, increased amounts will be spent on fulfilling this brokerage role. However, there needs to be more research into what the preferred products and services of the stakeholders are, and how they should be delivered. Moreover, little work has been done in relation to the relative costs of the various dissemination approaches;

• a series of notification and distribution mechanisms so that stakeholders are aware of what is available and when, where and how it can be obtained. These are important underpinning components of the dissemination approach to ensure that information is readily available in appropriate forms and formats. Again, VOCED and other information sources and networks are important sources of this information.

• the on-going evaluation of the products and services produced under the auspices of the national managed research and evaluation program to ensure that there is a genuine dialogue between those providing and those using the information so the products and services are meeting stakeholder needs and that the dissemination approaches used are appropriate and cost effective.
Figure 1

National Research and Evaluation Strategy

Primary audiences with information needs
- Politicians, policy makers and training authorities
- Research community
- ITABs, industry associations and unions
- Business enterprises
- Students, trainees and career advisors
- Overseas agencies
- Vocational education and training organisations
- Teachers and trainers

Evaluation of satisfaction

Information generation
- Core research & evaluation
- Managed research and evaluation program
- Statistical and survey information about VET
- Research project database
- Projects undertaken or funded by other individuals and organisations (universities, ITABs, training providers, ANTA, DEETYA, training authorities etc.)

Development of derived products
- Analysing
- Rewriting
- Simplifying
- Synthesising

Communication mechanisms
- Print-based material
  - Simple or highly developed
- Internet delivery
- Face-to-face
- Video/audio
- Fax/e-mail delivery

Products and services
- Individual books
- Series
- Periodicals
- Brochures
- Databases
- Web-based products
- Paper & electronic newsletters
- Conferences
- Workshops
- Information brokerage and maintenance of networks
- Consulting services
- Data enquiry services

Notification mechanisms
- Catalogue
- Direct mail
- Subscription
- Networks
- Personal visits
- Press articles
- Press advertisements
- World Wide Web

Distribution mechanisms
- Mail order
- Electronic mail
- World wide web
- Networks
- Mailing lists
- Events
- Access protocols
Doing dissemination – the next steps

The range of stakeholders groups has been outlined both in Figure 1 above and in the national research and evaluation strategy itself. (See appendix 1 and NCVER 1997). In implementing the dissemination approach, a number of activities are clearly called for. These include:

Conducting market research. Such research is required to obtain a clearer understanding of the information needs and preferred dissemination approaches of key stakeholders. It will also examine their ability to access a variety of information sources (eg the World Wide Web) and try to gather examples of good practice to advise product design and dissemination approaches. This research will also assess the planning processes we are beginning to develop. Finally the approach will also use focus groups to “test out” the recommended marketing approaches. Benchmarking and on-going evaluation will be used to refine and improve processes.

Planning dissemination approaches. The development and dissemination of research and evaluation project needs to take place within a planned framework. The framework begins with the strategy and is refined in project proposals received and selected for funding. Individual utilisation plans are needed for each project, as well as for each of the six research priorities forming part of the strategy. Thus each project is disseminated and used in its own right but, more importantly, it is part of a greater whole. (We used the word utilisation in the national strategy purposefully to remind ourselves constantly that dissemination is more about helping to ensure that research information and findings are used rather that merely provided). This is also why the issue of the ownership of the contracted material produced by the projects funded under the auspices of the national managed program is so important.

We will be developing utilisation plans with each project, a number of which may have implications for funding which go beyond initial contracts to produce primary and some derived products. We are beginning to think about the processes for developing such plans as well as keeping them under review in collaboration with the project teams and our own publications staff. In addition further plans are needed for the production of the derived products and services which feed off the research process and the primary products it generates. The simplest examples of such products are the stocktakes or “Reviews of Research” which summarise and critically examine the research in particular areas. However even these products may be further refined to develop such products as a “Research at a Glance”. A pilot for such a series is currently in preparation, and is focussing on training and small business. If successful at least three further products in this series will be produced in 1998.

Developing a range of products and services. The strategy outlines a comprehensive range of possible products and services which will be used individually or in combination to disseminate the findings of the projects funded through the national managed research and evaluation program. Processes for delivery of products face-to-face (for example through workshops and research roadshows or briefing sessions to particular interest groups) need to be developed. In addition a house style needs to be developed for the various products based on the findings of the market research which I have already briefly mentioned. Opportunities also need to be explored to place copy relating to project outcomes and consolidated findings in key priority areas in a range of newsletters and provide materials and other services which can feed into the other dissemination products and processes controlled by stakeholder groups themselves.

A spectrum of potential processes is described in Figure 1. The notion of a research “hot line” was also mentioned in the strategy. This requires considerable development of underpinning databases and information services to have any chance of success and ensure that linkages between interest groups and individuals is possible.

Over the next year, and following the market research outlined above, opportunities will be sought to develop, disseminate and evaluate a range of new products and services. This developmental stage offers an exciting potential both for NCVER and for those who are actively involved in the research process.
Developing the infrastructure to support product development and dissemination. The development of the dissemination role across the range of research activities is an important new initiative. This has fundamental implications for the organisation of NCVER's own production and marketing functions, as well as the role and ways in which more specialised resources outside NCVER itself, are used.

The massive increase in the range of products and services funded through the managed national research and evaluation program will have resource implications which need to be addressed by an appropriate balance of in-house infrastructure and outsourced services. This will ensure that the products of research are available when they are needed. In addition there need to be improvements in the notification and distribution mechanisms currently used to ensure that stakeholders have opportunities to seek information or are notified of and can receive relevant products in a timely fashion.

The utilisation plans for the primary and derived products of each project funded through the national managed research and evaluation program will require a considerable increase in the number and range of products and services developed both within the NCVER and externally to ensure that products and services are produced, 'marketed' and distributed expeditiously. This means that timelines are critical and that researchers will need to stick religiously to agreed schedules to ensure that products for which they are responsible are available in appropriate formats, to a quality standard and in a style which ensures that the minimum amount of work is needed to make these available to interested stakeholders.

The development of infrastructure also implies the need to develop, maintain and even enhance appropriate databases to assist in the processes of modification and dissemination. Databases controlled and used by other organisations and groups can also be used to assist the dissemination process.

Improving the capture of Australian research. While there has been a lot of research conducted over the year into various aspects of VET in Australia. (The recently completed project on the impact of VET research located a list of at least 1068 projects and project reports.) This research has varied from the very visible and public to that which was conducted for particular bodies but is now available more widely. Yet other research exists within the corporate memory, but is the stuff of myth and legend.

Therefore another key infrastructure issue which underpins the information dissemination role is ensuring that as much of the research and evaluation work being undertaken across the VET sector as possible is being captured and incorporated on the VOCED database. This will ensure that information about research in progress, as well as completed research, is available to the broadest range of stakeholder groups. The improved access to the VOCED database through the World Wide Web is of particular relevance because the database is now not just something which might have been locked away in a library. While it may not have been a visible and accessible resource in the past, it certainly is now. Moreover, its presence on the web gives Australian VET research a stronger international presence.

An important part of our dissemination approach, therefore, is to encourage and help ensure that researchers make use of and actively contribute to the VOCED database. In this way we hope to ensure that new research is documented and therefore more readily available to those who need to have access to it and use it. The process may also promote access to and linkages with those who are conducting, or have conducted, the research.

Conclusion

Improving and developing the dissemination approaches for the managed program of research and evaluation work in VET will be an important part of NCVER's management role of the process during this year. The NCVER and researchers, particularly those who are recipients of project funds, need to work closely together to ensure the best possible dissemination of findings. This means that the research information and products need to: be carefully targeted; be relevant to the needs of particular stakeholders; be well designed and produced; and provide clear and timely messages.
The products need to be disseminated in ways and in forms which ensure that they are known of and available to those who would most benefit from the information the research contains. In this way linkages between the creators and the various users of the research can be developed, promoted and enhanced.

References

