Developing scholarly practice among VET practitioners: the Community of Practice model

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Abstract

The increasing interaction and blurring between the two tertiary education sectors is creating new pressures on VET providers and practitioners, as they are increasingly required to engage with cultures and expectations associated with higher education, including adopting more scholarly practices.

NCVER’s Community of Practice scholarship is one model to help the initial development of scholarly practice among VET practitioners. The genesis for this program was the paucity of research proposals received by NCVER from VET practitioners. The scholarship program aims to encourage a culture of research in VET organisations by providing novice researchers, without any formal post-graduate research qualifications, the opportunity to do a 12-month work-based research project. The Community of Practice introduces participants and their employer organisations to the value of using research and data to make evidence-based decisions and solve real work problems. Around 40 novice VET researchers have participated in the program since it began in 2008. This presentation will provide an overview of the Community of Practice scholarship program, its aims, approach and achievements so far, as well as its potential broader applicability beyond the VET sector. The presentation is aimed at those who want to learn about programs that build research capacity and scholarly practice.

Introduction

The move towards an integrated tertiary education sector and the emergence of mixed sector institutions, for example TAFEs delivering higher education degrees, has been well documented. Along with this provision comes the expectation from regulators that the delivery of higher education qualifications in TAFEs will be equivalent with universities. The notion of scholarship is a critical aspect of this.

The definition of ‘scholarship’ is slowly being broadened beyond the ‘teaching versus research’ debate to include other elements such as integration and application (Beattie 2000). This paper asserts that no matter the definition of ‘scholarship’ research is definitely an element of this concept. This raises a few issues for VET, as the research culture within institutions is not as developed as that within universities. This is where our model of building research capacity may play a part.
Building researcher capacity

Beyond the realms of the ‘scholarship’ debate there are other reasons why the VET sector should be interested in developing a stronger research culture, such as the use of evidence to support good practice. In 2006, a review of NCVER’s research services showed that the number of research proposals NCVER received from VET practitioners was scarce (DEST 2006). The commissioned research was primarily won by university researchers and quite often the same researchers – those with a track record – were funded repeatedly. In turn this can limit the diversity of the research being funded and make it difficult for new researchers to become involved.

Ideally, those working within the VET sector should be interested in undertaking objective research in their own sector. They are submerged within the VET system and know the real issues that are facing it. For one, research can help practitioners to explore those issues that are persistent problems (Clayton 2012). In light of this, NCVER called for submissions on the topic of building research capacity and these considerations, along with suggestions from the sector, led to the development of the Community of Practice scholarships.

The Community of Practice model

The attention of the paper now turns to describing the model and then discussing what we have found does and does not work, from the perspective of NCVER – the funding body. It is hoped that readers will be able to use these lessons learned within their own organisations.

The model

The Community of Practice program is a vehicle for encouraging VET practitioners without any formal postgraduate research qualifications to ‘dip their toe’ into the world of research. They experience a full range of research activities including developing a proposal, searching literature, collecting data and writing up results. Participants receive a modest amount of $4000 to investigate a workplace issue, ensuring that the research is relevant to their organisation. Up to ten participants are selected every year by a selection panel made up of representatives from NCVER, AVETRA, Victoria University, Adult Learning Australia, TAFE Directors Australia, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training, and Group Training Australia.

One of the particular elements of this model is that participants do not go through the program alone – the point of the Community of Practice program is that it establishes a community of novice researchers who are learning about the research and writing process together and are able to provide support to one another throughout the year. To engage participants with the community they attend two workshops during the year, which focus on different aspects of research. A social networking page has also been developed by the Work-based Education Research Centre at Victoria University – the managers of the
Community of Practice – to help participants to remain in touch. As a way to help further develop the community, they also have the opportunity to attend NCVER’s ‘No Frills’ conference and present as a group.

Another fundamental element of support for participants is that they are matched with an experienced researcher attached to an AVETRA network of mentors. These mentors help to guide participants through conducting and writing up their research. AVETRA also organises teleconferences throughout the year for mentors so they can report on progress, ask advice from each other and have their questions answered by the program co-ordinators.

Given that the research is related to their workplace, participants must have the support of their employer for their project. Employers complete a statement of support as part of the application process indicating how they will make a matching contribution to the scholarship (i.e. time release, monetary funds). They also approve papers before they are published. Furthermore, participants are encouraged to have ‘critical friends’ within their workplace to provide advice on matters related to their organisation.

**What do they learn about?**

As the program is for novice researchers it is very important it has a strong learning basis. The key to this is the two compulsory workshops. These two-day events comprise of guest speakers, seminars, activities and social events. The first workshop sets the scene for the following twelve months by introducing the participants to each other and their topics. Given the small amount of funds associated with the scholarships, a large amount of time at this initial workshop is spent narrowing and refining the scope of each project. Time is also dedicated to introducing the participants to different research methods. Most often qualitative methods are chosen so there is a focus on interviews, focus groups and survey design. Another session focuses on how to find information on their topic. Tips are given on how to search for literature using various databases and how to access different resources for VET data that may be of interest to their projects. All participants leave the workshop with a clear idea of their research question and what method they may use to investigate it. It is expected that participants will go away and work with their mentors and remain in contact through the social networking webpage and meeting up at ‘No Frills’.

The second workshop is held around six months later; it helps to seal the community that has been formed. There is a strong emphasis on analysing the data the participants have collected and identifying themes in the analysis. This is an area of the program that has been given more attention over the years as it was realised that some participants were struggling with this aspect of research. Another focus of the workshop is on writing style. The participants are producing ‘occasional papers’, not detailed research reports, but for many of them they have never completed a substantial piece of writing. A portion of the workshop is dedicated to writing tips, going over expectations with the paper (for example having a clear line of argument) and also showing and working through the papers of
previous participants. As the end goal is to produce a paper that may be published by NCVER, attention is given to explaining NCVER’s publication process, including the review process, approval process and editing requirements.

In essence, the Community of Practice is a form of action-learning – participants are learning about research as they are doing it. Victoria University, AVETRA and NCVER are there to guide them through the different stages of their exposure to research.

**How it helps practitioners**

Quite often the VET practitioners who are involved in the Community of Practice are undertaking their research project on top of their normal workload. While they may find it time-consuming and sometimes overwhelming they have reported positive outcomes from their participation. Benefits of the program include raising the profile of their work both within and outside of their organisation, gaining promotions, increasing their confidence with research, improving their research skills and also increasing their knowledge in their subject area (Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder 2010).

Another outcome of the program is the opportunities for participants to network with more experienced researchers, which, for some, can lead to being involved in larger research projects (Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder 2010). For others they have used the Community of Practice as a stepping stone to further study, such as a masters by research. Overall, through participating in the Community of Practice, people feel connected to the VET research world.

**How it helps organisations**

One of the intentions of the push to build research capacity was to instil a research culture within VET institutes; the Community of Practice has made some ground in this. A review of the Community of Practice program (Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder 2010) found that participants’ research was having an impact within their own organisation. In some instances it was being used to inform organisational culture and planning. More generally, the Community of Practice helped organisations to be more aware of the range of research and statistical information available on VET.

**Characteristics of participants**

The following tables present information on the characteristics of participants, excluding those who have withdrawn or failed to complete. The Community of Practice selection panel attempts to award scholarships to a diverse range of applicants but, as shown in Table 1, the number of female participants far outweighs males.
Table 1  Number of participants by year and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Does not include those who have withdrawn or failed to complete.

The eastern states of New South Wales and Victoria heavily dominate the participant list (see Table 2). It is also worth noting that there is a lack of participants from the Northern Territory to have completed the program.

Table 2  Number of participants by state or territory (2008 to 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or territory</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Does not include those who have withdrawn or failed to complete.

Table 3 below illustrates the different types of organisations from where participants come. As the scholarships are marketed at VET practitioners it is no surprise that half of the participants are from TAFEs, but it is interesting to note that over a quarter of participants are from mixed sector institutes.

Table 3  Number of participants by organisation type (2008 to 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation type</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed sector institutes – TAFE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed sector institutes – other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community organisations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government bodies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private organisations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry associations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Does not include those who have withdrawn or failed to complete.

The majority of research projects are around the broad theme of teaching and learning (see Table 4). Teaching and learning is at the centre of a VET practitioner’s profession so it can be
expected that this theme will dominate their research projects, especially as they are workplace related. Interestingly, half of the projects on environment/sustainability were funded in 2011 so it would seem that this is becoming an area that is of concern to VET organisations.

Table 4  Number of participants\(^1\) by topic area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic area</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and learning</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and individuals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment/sustainability issues</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Does not include those who have withdrawn or failed to complete.

While not comprehensive, these descriptive statistics provide a snapshot of the VET practitioners who have participated in the program and the issues that are of interest to them and their organisations.

**Lessons learned**

Continuous improvement is at the heart of the Community of Practice. Each year refinements are made to the application process, selection process and different elements of the program. The following are some of what we have found to be the main lessons learned.

1. The application form is more important than you think

In the first year of the program, applicants were asked to submit a research proposal. It was soon realised that this was a mighty task for someone with limited research experience as their topic areas were quite broad and too ambitious. This made it difficult to ascertain what the applicant wanted to investigate. In following years a detailed application form that listed the exact information that was required was introduced. By aligning these points directly to the criteria that the selection panel selects on it was easier to compare applicants and their projects. Developing the proposal and narrowing the focus became a more explicit part of the first workshop.

2. Containing the passion

VET practitioners are passionate about their profession. Sometimes their research can be influenced too much by this passion and be informed too much by opinion rather than facts. This can influence the quality of their work. Providing advice in workshops about ensuring that their findings are based on evidence – either through the literature or references to their data – can help to mitigate this. However, it can still filter through in the language that
is used, making the reviewing and editing processes very important in helping to develop an objective argument.

3. The importance of a workshop

The initial year of the Community of Practice involved only one workshop for participants. This contributed to a poor completion rate of only 40%. Participants had felt that an additional workshop with a focus on writing their paper would have helped. Based on this feedback, a second workshop was introduced for subsequent years. As mentioned previously, this workshop has had a focus on data analysis and writing style. An added benefit of a second workshop is that it helps the organisers of the Community of Practice to track the progress of participants and identify who may need additional help to complete. Since the implementation of the second workshop, the number of participants to complete the program has improved dramatically.

4. Engagement is the key

The key element of any form of community of practice is that a community is formed. Creating avenues for participants to stay in touch over the course of twelve months is vital to the success of the community. Each year, the Community of Practice has had only a moderate amount of success at engaging participants in a community setting. The original connection between members is established at the first workshop where time is given to enjoy socialising together. However, once they leave the workshop it is difficult to monitor if they remain in contact. During the second year, Victoria University established a social networking site – the Ning – as a tool to help participants to remain in contact between workshops and share useful information such as handouts. It has had varied success since it was introduced as not all participants have been willing to actively engage in social networking. In an attempt to increase the usage, it is required that those applying for a scholarship state a willingness to use social networking tools. Participants are also shown how to use the tool at the first workshop. Since this requirement, participants have been more active on the site but there are still some who have not engaged and are at risk of missing out on information and peer support.

5. Where did the support go?

As the participants are investigating a work-based issue, their research is set within the institution in which they are employed so it is essential that employers show support for the project and the individual. Besides approving applications, employers are also asked to make a matching contribution towards the scholarship in terms of time-release and monetary funds. Not all employers have been forthcoming in the support that was pledged. This may be due to a lack of understanding about the amount of time it will take to undertake the research and write a paper or, due to the small amount of funds associated with the scholarship, it may not be seen as an organisational priority. This can create
difficulties for the participant as they find they need to do the research within their personal time and do not know how to handle the lost of support. In these occurrences, Victoria University has spoken with the employers to see if a resolution could be found. A lack of ongoing communication between participants and their employers can also lead to an end product that employers are not happy to have published. All of this can be to the detriment of the participant as they feel that their research is not valued. On the other hand, those who receive encouragement and support from their employers have a more positive research experience and find that their work does get noticed within their workplaces. There have also been cases where these people have been promoted. To try and increase levels of employer support for 2012, NCVER produced a newsletter aimed at the employer. It is too early to know whether this has made a difference yet.

6. Making sure mentors are on the same page

Most mentors are situated within universities and have experience in supervising higher degree research students. They need to adjust to the aims and nature of the program and understand that participants in the Community of Practice do not have the same level of research knowledge as their students and may need extra support. The teleconferences for mentors that AVETRA organises throughout the year are a good form of knowledge sharing. They provide the opportunity for mentors to be briefed on what participants have been told at workshops and to ask questions about the program. Quite often the mentors have similar concerns surrounding issues such as ethics or the nature of the paper and having this connection to the organisers at Victoria University and NCVER allows them to find the answers they need. The teleconferences also provide mentors with the avenue to track the progress of their participant against others. With mentors on the same page as the organisers of the Community of Practice, it is more likely that the final product will meet expectations, such as having a clearly defined research question, reflecting current trends, being accessible to a wide audience and informing policy and practice.

7. Location, location, location

Not all mentoring relationships have been a success and these failures have informed improvements for the following year. It has been found that a prior connection between the mentor and participant, regular face-to-face meetings and co-location are elements of a successful mentoring relationship (Bartram, Stanwick & Loveder 2010). Location is the most significant as it facilitates face-to-face meetings. However, distance remains an issue for those in more regional areas and unless there is a commitment from both the participant and mentor to communicate regularly via telephone and email these relationships can be ill-fated. In those situations, AVETRA steps in to find a more suitable relationship and extra support from the managers of the Community of Practice at Victoria University is offered to participants.

8. Where did all the time go?
Time management is hard for many researchers but for those who are inexperienced, it can be easy to underestimate how long collecting and analysing data, as well as writing a paper can take. Furthermore, these scholarship holders are completing this research in addition to their normal workload. Other issues such as sickness, work and family pressures can also make it hard for participants to juggle their research. From as early on as the application process, participants are asked to consider how they will balance the research project with their other work and life commitments. Also at the first workshop participants are provided with a timeline to work towards which can help them to track progress against key dates. But no matter how early on they think about balancing their project with other commitments or follow a timeline, unexpected things happen. When this does occur, it is best to be supportive and help them to find alternative ways of completing their project. Having said this, some participants have had no issues with managing their time and even submitted their papers early.

9. Co-ordination is essential

There are three main organisations involved in the Community of Practice – Victoria University who manage the program, AVETRA who organise the mentoring and NCVER who funds the program and reviews and disseminates the papers. Each organisation plays an essential role in ensuring the program runs smoothly so it is important that they work in unison regarding the aims of the program and what is expected. Each organisation needs to be respected and valued because they all make great contributions to the program. The most basic form of this is to ensure that whenever a decision is made that everyone is made aware. It may seem simple but if there is a miscommunication there can be a breakdown in respect.

10. Continued engagement in research

The Community of Practice program was established to help build research capacity within the VET sector. The program by itself is unlikely to produce many new researchers, rather it helps to develop an appreciation of research in the VET sector. For those who finish the program and wish to pursue further research there is not a clear path for them to take. They are encouraged to network with more experienced researchers with similar areas of interest in the hope that they may become involved in a research project. Their other option is to undertake a higher research degree, such as a masters by research or doctorate, to gain more experience and improve their research credibility. The Community of Practice can help individuals decide if this a path they wish to pursue.

Conclusion

The Community of Practice is only one model for encouraging more VET practitioners to become involved in research. The continuous improvement nature of the program has helped it to gain momentum. Through completing a work-based research project,
participants begin to value research and how it can help with their work practices. Some may view this as a form of individual development but their employers have also reported benefits for their organisational culture and planning. Its weakness in the scholarship debate is that it has not produced many new researchers for VET but its strength is that it has helped to encourage a culture of research within organisations and contribute to more reflective practitioners.

Acknowledgements

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References


