How vocational education and training providers are working innovatively with industry

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Vocational education and training (VET) enterprises are revealing a wide range of innovative responses in their efforts to work more successfully with their industry partners. In this ‘report card’ on how well they are performing in working innovatively with industry, the performance of these organisations is tested against nine characteristics of innovative enterprises. Innovative organisations: create learning cultures; make innovation a core capability; identify their innovators; reward people for bringing forward innovative ideas; use partnerships to bring in new knowledge to drive further innovation; have leaders who are risk-tolerant; develop teams and cross-functional teams; create communities of practice which meet regularly to discuss common interests; and provide places to be innovative.

Overall, the VET organisations which were studied are achieving remarkable outcomes for their industry partners, especially through their ability to partner successfully. Successful partnerships are going hand in hand with efforts to provide more flexible and relevant training solutions for industry. At the same time, the development of innovation in these training organisations can best be described as uneven. In many instances it is certain individuals and teams within institutions who are leading the way, rather than an organisational capability for innovation being the main driver. However, the case studies are cause for optimism about the VET industry in the longer term being a major contributor to the growth of Australia’s reputation for innovation.

Introduction

Australia has become very serious about its intentions to be a major player in the knowledge economy. While the services sector stills drives a large part of our economy, today our national prosperity is being linked increasingly to our aspirations for creating knowledge-based industries and a knowledge-based economy which rest on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information. If we are to meet these challenges, organisations
in a wide range of sectors will need to operate more innovatively in their response to the needs of customers and industry partners.

Innovation is described by Wolpert (2002) as ‘pursuing radical new business opportunities, exploiting new or potentially disruptive technologies, and introducing change into the core concept of your business’. Innovation is concerned with the successful implementation of creative ideas within the organisation. In more recent times, the term ‘innovation’ is being used to refer to all creative activities occurring within an organisation. Using the findings from previous business and organisational research, this chapter first describes nine characteristics of innovative enterprises. Various examples are given of how VET organisations are demonstrating these same characteristics in responding more innovatively to the needs of their industry partners and learners. These nine characteristics of innovative organisations are:

❖ Innovative organisations create learning cultures.
❖ They make innovation a core capability.
❖ Innovative organisations identify their innovators.
❖ People are rewarded for bringing forward innovative ideas.
❖ They use partnerships to bring in new knowledge to drive further innovation.
❖ The leader’s attitude about failure is a key to innovation.
❖ They develop teams and cross-functional teams.
❖ They create communities of practice which meet regularly to discuss common interests.
❖ Innovative enterprises provide places to be innovative.

These nine characteristics of innovative organisations have been identified from an extensive review of the academic research literature into innovation and innovative organisations (see Callan & Ashworth 2004). This report, published by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) provides a detailed review of this literature which has resulted in proposing these nine factors as characteristic of innovative organisations. It is not claimed that these characteristics are the only practices which appear to set innovative enterprises apart from other organisations. However, there is considerable evidence that many businesses in a variety of industries in a wide number of countries promote such practices to establish and to maintain their reputations as innovators.

Method

There are many well-documented examples already in the VET literature about how VET organisations are behaving innovatively, especially in the areas of
partnerships, networks and knowledge brokering (see Callan & Ashworth 2004; Gientzotis Consulting 2003; Mitchell et al. 2003). These innovations include developments in how training is being delivered, the involvement of industry as partners, greater levels of customisation of the training, and the introduction of skills centres. This current chapter draws considerably upon such cases, and brings them together as a ‘report card’ in terms of how VET enterprises are establishing a reputation as innovative partners with business. In addition, new cases are included from current research into innovative VET organisations (Callan 2004).

In this ongoing research, the author visited and talked to VET organisations specifically about how they are promoting innovation and innovative problem-solving in the context of identifying training solutions to best meet client needs. Those organisations visited in order to construct more detailed case studies were Gold Coast Institute of TAFE, Victoria University of Technology, Institute of TAFE Tasmania, and Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE. Project funding only supported a small number of case studies where actual visits could occur, and given this, it was decided, where possible, to select the major cases from across different states. Organisations were selected based upon evidence of winning awards for innovation; write-ups of achievements in innovation; and through nomination by TAFE directors from across various states. In addition, a number of smaller case studies were undertaken, largely through telephone interviews, with representatives of the Australian Institute for Care Development, Construction Training Centre, Aviation Australia, Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE, Northpoint Institute of TAFE, Australian Ikebana Centre College of Art and English, and Workplace Australia.

Findings

Innovative organisations create learning cultures

We know that more innovative organisations have an organisational motivation or a desire to innovate—a basic orientation or culture which supports creativity and innovation. They also take steps to build cultures to promote learning. Learning organisations are skilled in creating, acquiring and transforming knowledge, and in changing their behaviour to reflect this new knowledge and insights. In particular, they permit a basic organisational curiosity which promotes a desire among employees to be innovative. A true learning organisation promotes innovation by empowering its people, integrating quality initiatives with quality of work life and creating free space for learning. Such learning-focused enterprises also encourage collaboration, promote inquiry, and create continuous learning opportunities for their employees, and often with their customers and partners.

This research and case studies have shown that VET organisations are promoting innovation, in particular by encouraging staff at all levels to feel...
empowered in how they develop new and different ways of meeting the
training needs of employers. In its partnership with Mitsubishi, Onkaparinga
Institute has established an industry-led model which has moved to a
consortium arrangement between several companies in the region. This
consortium supports the principle that it is a learning community, with all
partners learning from one another. This same approach has been extended to
innovative partnerships in learning with mining companies, through the South
Australian Chamber of Mines and Energy, schools and the institute, to promote
training and careers in mining. The Institute of TAFE Tasmania has adopted a
learning culture approach to training packages, whereby more flexible and
work-based strategies to facilitate the learning of students are explored.
Training packages were an integral part of the overall TAFE Tasmania
submission which resulted in their winning the National Training Provider of
the Year Award in 2000.

They make innovation a core capability

Innovative organisations prize innovation as a core capability. Leonard-Barton
and his associates (1994) describe core capabilities as a ‘capacity for action’. Core
capabilities are what makes an organisation unique and give it a competitive
advantage. To build core capabilities, an organisation needs to adopt an
incremental approach to improving and expanding current capabilities. The
organisation focuses on process as well as product, and looks for innovative
to challenge conventional thinking. Innovative enterprises can lose
ground, however, when their core capabilities become so embedded in the
culture of the organisation that they prevent change. On the other hand,
innovative companies establish organisational practices which prevent their
developing rigid views about the excellence of their organisation. The Virgin
group of companies are well-known innovators: Virgin Management
Investment, for instance, continually asks questions which challenge any
potential sense of complacency.

In the VET case studies, Gold Coast Institute of TAFE has explicitly built into
its strategic planning, an undertaking that it will develop and nurture an
innovative culture to encourage research and implementation of innovative
products. It plans to build a range of innovation tools and competencies, and
will measure the success of these tools by recording the number of innovations
on an innovation register. Also looking to the future in terms of using further
change to build more innovation capability, TAFE Tasmania is using an explicit
benchmarking process to review the relative merits of its achievements on its key
performance measures. The senior team at the institute have built benchmarking
into their everyday discussions of their achievements, and more significantly, the
next strategic goals to be targeted. Like Gold Coast Institute, they also have key
performance indicators relating to the learning experiences of students as well
as staff.
Innovative organisations identify their innovators

Truly innovative organisations require ‘entrepreneurial heroes’—innovators who are out to create wealth and attract resources, be they capital or talent. Although champions come from all levels of the organisation, champions who have more power and responsibility tend be associated with more successful innovations (Amabile, Hadley & Kramer 2003). There is also evidence that multiple champions are a requirement for innovative ventures because of the number of hurdles which must be overcome to be successful.

In earlier work on large industry–VET provider partnerships (Callan & Asworth 2004), we discovered that the success of these partnerships resided with a few champions at different levels of the organisation who were passionate about the financial and non-financial rewards to be gained by working more closely and innovatively with industry. These champions were usually operating with staff who specialised in partnering and who held titles like ‘business development manager’, ‘business manager’, ‘enterprise officer’ and ‘partnership manager’. A teacher, with the support of a business manager who was empowered by the leader of the training organisation, typically led this innovative solution to training delivery.

In recent VET case studies (Callan 2004), many examples emerged of how individual teachers are leading the way in developing innovative responses to meet special training situations and learner needs. Through the use of pictorial text and workbooks, puzzles, flexible delivery and special developments in assessment, a teacher at Onkaparinga Institute has modified a number of delivery and assessment strategies to allow individuals with an intellectual disability to complete qualifications in the horticultural field. Another at TAFE Tasmania is driving a project-based learning approach to deliver training to engineering students. The Bleriot XI historic aircraft engineering student project is providing an affordable and achievable project in which the students and staff are involved in researching, designing and assembling a museum-quality flying replica of this aircraft, powered by an original 1909 Anzani aircraft engine. The project was an entry in both the Tasmania Division Engineering Excellence Awards 2003 and the National Engineering Excellence Awards 2003.

People are rewarded for bringing forward innovative ideas

It is people who innovate, not processes or cultures. Successful innovative firms align the organisation’s rewards and recognition structures with the goals of innovation. Innovation does not come without cost, and inadequate forms of rewards and recognition are impediments to fostering innovation. Managers play an integral role in enhancing innovation by providing a supportive environment for all employees. It is managers, in particular, who send the signal that innovation is valued, rewarded and important in the organisation. They do this by providing adequate resources, and by attaching the company’s means
for reward or recognition to innovation goals. If there is an inadequate reward, employees have little financial or professional incentive to innovate. In addition, those who are innovators become frustrated by the lack of rewards and often move to other places where the financial and non-financial rewards are more explicit (Amabile, Hadley & Kramer 2002).

In technical and further education (TAFE) institutes, there are numerous examples of how innovation is being rewarded through awards and prizes to staff responsible for innovation. These awards can include additional access to training opportunities and visits nationally and internationally to view how other enterprises are promoting learning and innovation. At the same time, compared with the private sector, the public VET system is limited in the financial or other rewards it is able to offer to innovators. In the context of responding more strategically to the issue of rewards for innovation, TAFE Tasmania and Gold Coast Institute of TAFE are implementing recognition programs which publicly support, recognise and celebrate innovative solutions to training.

They use partnerships to bring in new knowledge to drive further innovation

There are two contrasting positions about innovation. One view is that innovation is an internal capability, where outsiders, because of fear of intellectual property loss, are excluded from this knowledge development. The alternative view is that innovation is best seen as a form of ‘knowledge brokering’ across organisations through partnerships and networks (Hargadon & Sutton 2000). Many people argue that successful innovation requires the latter, including an ability to harvest ideas and expertise from a wide array of sources. The best way to do this is through more formal partnerships, which enable organisations to share their skills and knowledge. Because all partners are interested and involved, partnerships are more likely to mean that innovative projects can be maintained in the event of cutbacks or changed priorities. Partnerships between organisations build levels of trust and produce implicit and explicit arrangements which promote exchanges of resources and knowledge which, in turn, promote innovation in organisations.

Partnerships in VET are being used in numerous ways to promote more innovative programs, consulting opportunities, staff development and change in the workplaces of the providers and industry organisations. The Ford Motor Company of Australia, for example, is using training partnerships to achieve a variety of strategic and change management objectives. The Ford Deakin Prime Alliance provides a range of innovative education programs at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, supervisory training, research, and consulting services for Ford. This company is also involved in a partnership with Ballarat University (TAFE Division) undertaking a number of Reframing
the Future initiatives funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). This Reframing the Future initiative promotes opportunities for staff development and organisational change, whereby teams of staff introduce ideas which foster change, collaboration, and team and individual learning in the workplace. Ford is also promoting the careers of students by partnering with various universities to provide scholarships to outstanding female students to encourage women to take up careers in engineering.

Partnerships enable innovations in training delivery; for example, the Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE in partnership with Russco, a body repair shop in Townsville, has re-examined the concept of block release. This institute is able to provide automobile trade apprenticeship training in Far North Queensland without the need to send apprentices to Brisbane for block release. Students are trained through exposure to clients and through workplace projects. Remote locations also create special challenges for delivery that are leading to new innovations. A partnership between Argyle Diamond Mines and Kimberley Group Training, for example, is providing training organised in this remote location, and is tailored to meet the mine’s two weeks on, two weeks off, work schedule. The training organisation is providing technical advice, literacy and numeracy assessments, and administration of the training. Different modes of delivery are also being combined in innovative ways by the TAFE NSW Hunter Institute: the institute is delivering courses through its maritime industries partnership by combining teleconferencing, online learning and the use of workplace mentors.

Most partnerships emerging today provide benefits to both parties and involve cooperation, the sharing of resources and the development of ‘partnering skills’. Over time, this knowledge and these skills about how to successfully partner become a source of competitive advantage for the enterprises involved. The best of these partnerships are focused upon longer-term outcomes. In an investigation of larger, and typically more commercial VET industry–provider partnerships (Callan & Ashworth 2004), it was discovered that the highest performing VET partnerships thrive on trust, open communication and the sharing of information. They are focused upon achieving a set of goals which both partners agree are challenging and worthwhile. As the training partnership grows and matures, new goals are established.

Partnerships, customisation and innovation go hand in hand. In New South Wales, Western Sydney Institute of TAFE provided tailored training for various industries involved in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. This institute, through its partnership with P & O Cold Logistics, is now providing customised training for Woolworths staff who work in cool rooms in temperatures as low as minus 28°C. To achieve its goal of nationally accredited training for call centre employees, the Centrelink partnership with the North Coast Institute of TAFE requires customised and innovative approaches to training and assessment. Possessing the accredited certificate IV, the staff are able to transfer to other call centres with evidence of their knowledge and skills.
The Institute of TAFE Tasmania is involved in a number of innovative partnerships. In a well-known partnership with the catamaran ferry builder, INCAT, it organised the restructuring of the training of INCAT staff, including removing about half of the existing curriculum deemed irrelevant to the company’s business needs. The Institute of TAFE Tasmania and the Australian Maritime College are partnering to support the new Australian College in Kuwait. Teaching staff are travelling from Tasmania to Kuwait to complete a number of tasks, including external audits using the Australian Quality Training Framework. The quality process being provided through this partnership is ensuring the continued improvement in customer focus and the development of well-informed students at the Australian College.

The leader’s attitude about failure is a key to innovation

Risk is an integral part of innovation. Successful innovative organisations use risk constructively to help the organisation improve and to learn (Denhardt & Denhardt 2002). In a previous NCVER report on the capabilities required to lead and manage in training organisations (Callan 2001), VET managers described nine capabilities. Significantly, one of these capabilities—business and entrepreneurial skills—focused on the ability to promote innovation, creativity, risk-taking and learning among staff. Within this environment, many writers are talking about the ‘failure tolerant leader’ (for example, Farson & Keyes 2002); that is, someone who stumbles on the innovation path will be forgiven. Failure-tolerant leaders help people overcome fear, and in the process, create a culture of intelligent risk-taking which leads to sustained innovation. They are more likely to engage at a personal level with the people whom they lead. Indeed, research on workplace creativity shows that it is not the individual employee’s freedom as much as managerial involvement which produces really creative acts. Numerous case studies reveal that highly competitive companies like Sony, Canon, 3M and Virgin have failure-tolerant leaders who tend to treat mistakes as an opportunity for organisational learning. Managers at 3M, for instance, frequently reinforce the company’s mistake-tolerant atmosphere by freely admitting their own mistakes.

Are there failure-tolerant leaders in the VET sector? Almost all of the senior managers spoken to in the author’s most recent case studies (Callan 2004) described how they were attempting to change cultures from being risk-averse to being more risk-tolerant. Staff were being empowered to use training packages to develop more innovative, flexible and customised approaches to the delivery of training. Senior staff were seeing tremendous changes in the willingness of their staff to engage more directly with industry, and to build upon existing partnerships to find additional fee-for-service income. Many of the larger and more commercial industry partnerships in particular had involved decisions which led to the sharing of staff, resources and risks between the provider and the industry partner. Victoria Institute of Technology currently hosts a number of large successful partnerships in transport logistics with
bodies like Connex, MTrains and Linfox, which are being built upon high levels of trust, close working relationships and shared risk-taking. These partnerships are delivering ‘clusters of skills’ which are immediately useful to various parts of the workforces of their industry partners. In most of the partnerships noted earlier, this same story is being repeated with similar levels of success.

They develop teams and cross-functional teams

Teams are a major tool in promoting both learning and innovation. Recent research shows that such teams must draw upon expertise from across the organisation. The advantages of cross-functional teams are that they allow relationships to be strengthened between functions, while still enabling individual expertise to be active (Leonard-Barton et al. 1994).

Are cross-functional teams being used to promote innovation in VET? Faced with the challenge of bringing together staff from geographically dispersed campuses across Tasmania, the leadership team of TAFE Tasmania has established around 60 delivery teams within learning networks, with team membership ranging across the various campuses. Such teams are identified by the current leadership as critical to the success of the institution in being voted as one of the most innovative training providers in Australia. This institute, in its further efforts to relinquish control and to empower staff, is moving the organisation of delivery teams from institutes to programs, and discussing the further moves to clusters, and in the future, to a single networked organisation.

Highly networked and cohesive teams are also crossing institutional boundaries. The panel-beating teams at the Ithaca campus of Brisbane North Institute of TAFE have established a highly cohesive unit which has proved very willing to be flexible and innovative in how it responds to the different needs of its students. In particular, the flexible and cooperative approach across the two institutions has encouraged more employers to indenture apprentices. Their relationship with employers is supported by regular industry nights. Gold Coast Institute of TAFE has established three cross-functional working groups (user choice, educational and international). Among the roles for these groups is the goal of driving innovation in all facets of educational delivery across the institute.

They create communities of practice which meet regularly to discuss common interests

An extension to the success of project groups is the creation of more informal, collaborative work groups called ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger & Snyder 2000). In communities of practice, members work together because of shared expertise and a passion for a joint enterprise. They are self-selected team-based structures which can be formed either within a business or across organisations. Such collaborative work groups are usually established in response to an external catalyst or for the purpose of networking with peers.
and keeping up to date. People share stories of problems over coffee and the learning from these is applied to the next situation. These conversations turn implicit knowledge into more explicit knowledge which can be shared and possibly used in solving new problems.

In many TAFE institutions, the Reframing the Future initiative has promoted the development of opportunities for staff to discuss and share stories and learning. The Institute of Tasmania used funding provided through this ANTA program to enable staff from three of its campuses to meet and share ideas and strategies. The institute facilitated their meeting with staff from Canberra Institute of Technology and Sunraysia Institute of TAFE to discuss their shared experiences with training packages. TAFE Tasmania is using a workplace assessor group as a form of a community of practice in its horticulture training. Its members meet monthly to discuss issues related to assessment, and to further develop assessor guides and to moderate assessment procedures. The moderation process now includes industry representatives. The institute has also developed a community of practice arrangement with Hewlett-Packard in Melbourne. One outcome of this arrangement was a visit to Tasmania by three senior executives from Hewlett-Packard who workshops with the senior team of the institute on the topic of the challenges involved in managing organisational change to produce more customer-centric organisations. At the time, these three executives were able to share their insights about the merger taking place between their company and Compaq.

Finally, Gold Coast Institute has developed a community of practice or incubator in which staff in clothing production in the institute are meeting with local industry to investigate new ways of classifying jobs, job roles and new approaches to multiskilling to attract new types of employees who will re-invigorate the clothing manufacture industry in Australia. Industry partners in this incubator arrangement are Billabong, Voodoo Dolls, Salty Tiger and Brothers Nielsen, all of whom specialise in youth and surf wear.

Innovative enterprises provide places to be innovative

‘Innovation labs’ are another tool being used in a variety of public and private sector organisations worldwide to promote and to teach innovation. The re-invention laboratories created by the United States government within its re-inventing government initiative are one example of such efforts. Experimentation is encouraged through a relaxation of departmental and central agency controls. The laboratories where seed money is allocated involve a two-to-three-day process which aims to assist employees to develop ‘rule-busting’ ideas. Attendees are encouraged to learn from radical innovations outside their industry, and in groups of eight, they brainstorm ideas for new businesses or new approaches to existing businesses.

Within VET, ‘innovation labs’ are possibly best exemplified in terms of the growing emergence of skills centres. These innovations are typically high-profile
and have involved substantial government funding, as well as some commercial risk for the partners. In Western Sydney, the Brick Industry Training Company is partnering with Mirvac and Lend Lease Corporation in the construction of 1800 homes over a five-year period. For their on-the-job training, apprentices are working under the supervision of a Mirvac trainer. Off-the-job training, provided by the Technology Park Skills Centre, supports this skills development and learning. In South Australia, manufacturing learning centres are using staff in manufacturing companies as coaches for students who are learning on the job as part of a school-based partnership with Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE and local schools.

In Queensland, the ANTA-funded skills centre provided to Aviation Australia is now participating in training partnerships in aero-skills with a range of clients, including Qantas and Boeing. Also in Queensland, the Construction Training Centre has emerged as a centre of excellence for industry-led, directed and focused training and skills development. The centre acts mostly in a brokering role. Assessment, training and skills development programs at its Salisbury facility are delivered by the centre’s training provider partners, all but one of whom lease space at the centre to deliver these programs. In South Australia, manufacturing learning centres involve a partnership between Mitsubishi Motors Australia, the Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE, and various local schools. This partnership is raising the profile of manufacturing and employment in the community by offering school students the chance to undertake on-the-job learning programs.

Shop fronts are being frequently used by VET enterprises to access clients, but also, by virtue of the often commercial nature of the shop front, they provide a working environment in which students and their instructors learn how to meet the needs of customers. These shop fronts include actual or simulated call centres (Tasmania TAFE, Onkaparinga TAFE), beauty salons (Gold Coast TAFE), commercial farming operations (Tasmania TAFE), and a ‘shop for the day’ concept which has students managing the stock control, pricing, advertising, display and float of the days takings in a small retail outlet on campus (Onkaparinga Institute). In addition, the Institute of TAFE Tasmania uses a shop front in Hobart whereby the tourism industry utilises tourism diploma students for work on real projects. Spencer Institute of TAFE in South Australia is also working with the tourism industry to provide a virtual online tourism office for delivery to remote locations.

In another form of shop front, a mobile tyre training centre is delivering nationally accredited training to youth at risk in South Australia. The mobile training unit is allowing participants in Adelaide, as well as those in remote regions, to complete a certificate II qualification. The partnership is between Youth Education Australia and Bridgestone. This initiative is funded by ANTA, and has received the support of Bridgestone, Cummins, Performance Wheels and Beissbarth Australia in the construction and design of the training unit. Another shop front concept is the Great TAFE Home Work project launched in
2003, in which TAFE students from over 15 course areas are involved in the renovation, electrical engineering, plumbing, interior decorating, furnishing and landscape design of houses and land provided by the Redcliffe Council and Caboolture Council in Queensland. Brisbane Institute of TAFE is coordinating the project. Upon completion of the renovations, a further group of TAFE students from marketing, business and tourism will become involved.

Conclusions

It is clear that many VET organisations across our nation are innovative partners with business. This ‘report card’, as described earlier, does demonstrate how VET enterprises, particularly through good leadership, clever partnerships with industry, and the use of teams are being innovative.

At the same time, the development of innovation in these training organisations can best be described as uneven, in that certain individuals and teams within institutions are leading the way, rather than a capability for innovation within the organisation itself being the main driver. In the case studies of partnerships (Callan & Ashworth 2004), and in ongoing work on innovative VET organisations (Callan 2004), no single institution has emerged as one where innovation is a core capability—a major test of being an innovative enterprise. Nor did any chief executive officer of a VET organisation claim that they were in charge of an innovative organisation, but rather that they had begun the journey, with some exceptional individuals leading the way in developing more responsive and flexible training solutions for industry.

However, putting this into context, in Australia today very few of our businesses are being profiled in the media or in our day-to-day conversations as innovators. The growth in ‘Smart State’ initiatives by at least three states, as well as the federal government’s strategies are heralding a somewhat late Australian entry into the promotion of innovation as an industry and national priority (that is, Innovation Action Plan for the Future, and the Backing Australia’s Ability program, providing $2.9 billion over five years). Importantly, the case studies profiled in this chapter encourage optimism about the VET sector’s potential in the longer term to contribute to this national endeavour to build more innovative Australian enterprises.

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