Research proposal: John Guenther

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Field of research code:

RFCD: Education 339999

Field of education: Australian Standard Classification of Education (ASCED) 079999

Area of study

The area of study for this research falls under the umbrella of the Northern Territory University (NTU) category of 'education in diverse contexts' and relates to Theme 4 of the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre (TS-CRC) (Human Capability Development). The study also intersects with Theme 2 and Theme 3 of the Centre—focussing on VET as a tool for use in conjunction with regional planning and management to impact on the sustainable development and management of the region.

Faculty contact

The faculty contact for this research is Professor Ian Falk—Chair, Rural & Remote Education, Faculty of Education, Science and Health (EHS).

Thesis title

VET as a tool for regional planning and management in savanna communities.

Aim

The project proposes to determine how vocational education and training (VET) can be used most effectively as a tool for regional and remote savanna communities and stakeholders to enhance regional planning as it relates to the sustainable management of natural resources in conjunction with the economic, social and cultural needs of the region.

Background

Vocational education and training in Australia has developed and expanded significantly in recent years. During the past decade participation in VET training has increased by 77% (NCVER 2000). In 2001 there were 1 756 800 people participating in VET in Australia (NCVER 2001a). The scope of VET has broadened in recent years to incorporate schools based VET—otherwise known as VET in schools—programs and a mix of institutional and non-institutional training. Students enrolled with private providers accounted for 6% of all training in 1997. By 2001 this had increased to 13%. In the same period VET in schools enrolments increased from 1% to 11% of all VET students (NCVER 2002b, 2003).

While the value of adult and community education (ACE) is often reported in terms of individual and community benefit, including development of social capital (Birch *et al* 2003, Falk *et al* 2000), the value of vocational education and training is most often measured in terms of employment outcomes or individual perceptions of quality (NCVER 2002a, 2002b; Cully *et al* 2000) based on an unstated assumption that VET stakeholders are essentially limited to individuals, employers and training providers. Funding for programs is frequently tied to employment outcomes. The economic benefits of VET are well reported in terms of individual income and career

enhancement, in terms of the value for employers and industries and in terms of the general skills needs for the nation as a whole (e.g. ANTA 1998, Doyle *et al* 2000).

However, the value of VET includes a range of social, environmental, health, educational and individual outcomes measured in terms of wellbeing indicators (ABS 2001c; CRLRA 2001b; OECD 1973, 1982, 2001), which it could be argued, are just as significant particularly for rural and remote communities. It could also be argued that because of the emphasis on enterprises and industry, VET is a tool that is under-utilised for the broader goals of communities and regions. The flexibility of VET delivery means that Training Packages can be adapted for use in a broad range of contexts without the requirements of large amounts of physical infrastructure or resources.

VET as a tool for enhancing social wellbeing can be seen in the context of social capital (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000). The development of social capital in a community is widely considered to be a key to its sustainability and long-term socio-economic success (Falk & Guenther 2000, Falk & Harrison 1998, Woolcock 1998). Many of the case studies in a ten site review of VET in regional Australia (CRLRA 2001a) identified that the active presence of VET in a community resulted in improvements in social identification and cohesion and increased capacity to contribute to community groups—all indicators of the presence social capital.

VET partnerships are developing across Australia to address the needs of interest groups, communities and individuals (Kearns et al 1996; Kilpatrick, Fulton & Bell 2001, Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk & Prescott 2001). Recent research into more than 100 VET partnerships around Australia (Kilpatrick & Guenther 2003) reveals that rural VET partnerships are particularly useful for meeting the needs of regional communities. The outcomes of these partnerships are determined largely by the partners themselves. The value of strategic VET alliances and partnerships for effecting change and building the knowledge, skills and capacities of rural and remote communities cannot be underestimated.

Objectives and outputs

Within the framework of the broad aim of the project, the objectives of this research are to:

1. Review the capacity of the 200 urban centres / localities (ABS 2002a) in the savanna region to act as a vehicle for VET delivery to meet the goals and objectives of the TS-CRC. The capacity of the region would be measured in terms of the social, economic and human resources available.

2. Identify education and training gaps (in terms of programs, locations and resources) across savanna communities and among savanna stakeholders that provide strategic opportunities for improved natural resource management practices consistent with economic, social and cultural needs of the region.

3. Determine models of effective education and training delivery for savanna stakeholders that build community capacity and at the same time have a direct impact on the management of the region's resources, particularly as they relate to pastoral, Indigenous, conservation, tourism and mining interests.

4. Evaluate the potential of partnerships in facilitating effective delivery strategies.

5. Develop and trial strategic learning packages consistent with the learning needs and arrangements of stakeholders and the Conservation and Land Management Training Package.

6. Assess the effectiveness of learning packages in terms of the TS-CRC strategic directions. The project would establish benchmarks to determine the success of learning outcomes in meeting targets for key results areas.

Additionally it is anticipated that a number of other outputs in the form of papers and reports will be developed through the course of the project. In particular it is expected that a paper relating to the capacity of Northern Australian communities will be developed at the end of Phase I (see Project timing, page 6) of the project. Other possible outputs would include reports and papers, presented through conferences that effectively disseminate information and highlight models of effective capacity building, identified through the research.

Significance

The tropical savanna region of Northern Australia represents a large proportion of rural and remote Australia—with approximately 200 urban centres and localities (ABS 2002a) and numerous other small, isolated communities scattered throughout the region. There is a significant body of research on community capacity, sustainability and development, but—possibly because of a narrow definition of VET—there is only a relatively small body of research available (e.g. CRLRA 2001a, 2001b, 2001c) on the links between VET and these issues. The potential for VET to benefit the various social, ecological, industrial and cultural interests of this region have been largely unexplored with few exceptions (Arnott 1997, 2000; Arnott & Benson 2001).

Much is known about the *vocational* outcomes of VET in rural and remote regions of Australia. For example, research shows that overall participation rates are similar in rural areas compared to metropolitan regions, but that participation in some forms of VET are higher in rural areas (Hillman, Marks & McKenzie 2002, MCEETYA 2000b). Quality of training provision is a major factor affecting outcomes in rural and remote areas (CRLRA 2001b; Kilpatrick, Falk & Hamilton 2002; Schofield 1999a, 1999b, 2000).

There are also a number of examples in literature where VET programs are reported to be effective, giving rise to models of delivery and practice in rural and remote areas of Australia (Chiswell *et al* 2001). For example, a DETYA (1999) publication cites case studies from 36 schools in remote Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia. While the outcomes reported in the handbook were primarily related to personal and educational achievement it is worth noting that in almost every case, community organisations or individuals outside the education system were also involved. More recently the Queensland Government (2001) has published a document detailing examples of VET partnerships in the state. While the foreword states that the projects cited are concerned "to ensure these centres meet both the social and economic needs of the respective communities" the dominant theme through the document is that VET partnerships are primarily concerned with getting Indigenous people to work.

Policy and strategic direction for VET in rural and remote regions of Australia is well developed. The MCEETYA (2000a) framework for rural and remote education for example, recognising the general disadvantage of rural students and the rights of all

Australians to quality education (HREOC 2000), lays a foundation for strategic plans to address inequities.

Strategic development of Indigenous VET policy is also well established and based on broad research (MCEETYA 2000c) and political inquiries that have concluded that there are a number of inequities for Indigenous students including literacy, employment, attendance and retention. Collins' (NDTE 1999) review of education in the Northern Territory for example, identified a number of barriers to participation, including low literacy levels, inappropriate modes of delivery and problems with funding arrangements. Robinson and Hughes (1999) determined that nationally, access to VET among Indigenous people was about the same as the rest of the population. Employment and completion outcomes were found to be lower than for non-Indigenous people. These findings mirror the situation in the Northern Territory (Minister for Employment, Education and Training 2002). However, while acknowledging the importance of outcomes other than employment and education, Robinson and Hughes were reluctant to explore the significance of personal and social outcomes—instead arguing for a refinement and extension of existing measurement systems. Boughton (1998) concluded that there was a need to "disaggregate the national and State data on which most strategies and policy directions are based, and pay much closer attention to the historically specific conditions in particular localities and regions." This project aims to do just that.

Clark (1997), discussing systemic and policy issues associated with VET and Indigenous people in the Northern Territory asserted that "the training reform agenda has fallen short of recognising the importance of personal and social outcomes…". Policy direction for VET among Indigenous people is however shifting toward a more inclusive position on outcomes, incorporating a number of indicators and benchmarks outside the traditional focus of vocational results. ANTA's (2000a) national strategy for Indigenous vocational education and training includes objectives incorporating cultural inclusivity and life-long learning, moving closer to a position advocated by Henry *et al* (1998) in *Djama and VET*. Of note is the inclusion in ANTA's (2000b) blueprint that community outcomes including "increased resources for community development including communications, business, health and justice and opportunities in the arts, sports, and recreation" are integrated into the plan. Given that this is a relatively new direction for VET, this research provides an opportunity to test the commitment among VET stakeholders, to these objectives and the potential of VET to deliver social outcomes among Indigenous communities. Where the project intersects with Indigenous communities the impact of recent changes to policy and the extent of the implementation of the ANTA (2002a) blueprint will be assessed.

While significant, Indigenous communities are not the only stakeholders of savanna communities. There is a diverse range of interests represented within the Savanna region of Northern Australia. These include tourism, mining, pastoral and environmental interests. The educational needs of these stakeholder groups are seldom discussed in literature. Further, the ability of VET to impact the capacity of the communities to which these stakeholder groups belong, is not raised either, except in terms of the broad economic benefit that employment brings to a community. This project aims to address these outstanding issues where knowledge and research are lacking.

Methodology

Phase 1—Data analysis and literature review

Phase one of the project would consider a range of social indicators identified in literature and using existing sources such as census data (ABS 1997, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2002f; BRS 1999) and other VET related data (NCVER 2002a, 2002b) including data from the Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) and the Northern Territory Education and Training Authority (NTETA) to determine the extent of VET participation and look for quantitative measures that provide contextual background for the study. Evaluation of key variables such as remoteness (Department of Aged Care 1999), population change, income, Indigenous status, gender, employment, education and other appropriate socio-economic variables (Burgess 1986) will be used to determine how these factors impact VET participation.

Literature will also be reviewed to determine the extent and purpose of partnerships across the savanna region (Kilpatrick & Guenther 2003). Where possible, an assessment of available social and physical infrastructure in rural and remote communities of the region will also be made. Through this process an understanding of the context, training gaps and opportunities will be gained. Following on from earlier TS-CRC research (Benson *et al* 1997) and a review of other literature (e.g Kilpatrick & Guenther 2002), a focus of the review of training gaps will be the extent to which the various intersecting environmental, industrial, cultural and community needs are being met. The latter part of the first phase will identify models of training delivery in the savanna region that are effective in meeting the broad range of savanna stakeholders.

This combination of literature review and data analysis will in itself form the basis of a meta-analysis (Hunter & Schmidt 1990) that will be used to inform the direction of the research design. It will also be used to triangulate data that is collected in Phase 2.

Phase 2—Site identification and data collection

The emergent nature of the research design means that the precise focus of the project will be defined as a result of the prior literature review and meta-analysis (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). It is expected that by the beginning of Phase 2 sites would have been selected, types of respondents identified and a framework for the development of interview schedules and survey instruments built.

The focus of the second phase of the project will be to evaluate a selection of the more effective approaches to delivery that meet these needs in the region with survey instrument design and end result. It is anticipated that a case study approach will be taken to research at least two regional sites identified in Phase 1. The perception of various stakeholders will be assessed through a series of semi-structured interviews using ethnographic techniques (Creswell 1998, Babbie 1998).

It is anticipated that this phase will involve data gathering field work elements at some remote locations in the Savanna region. It is possible that some of the data may involve work at Indigenous communities. It is acknowledged that limited cultural understanding may require indirect approaches to potential respondents through third parties who do have a working knowledge of the communities. The research is not designed to be an ethnography of the communities involved, nor is it deigned to effect

change in the communities—consistent with an action research model (Greenwood & Levin 1998).

An important part of the site identification process will be to establish networks with training providers and other stakeholders in remote regions, who can facilitate effective data gathering. This phase will also be used to determine specific needs to inform the development of trial learning resources to be developed in Phase 3.

Phase 3—Analysis and completion of outputs

A focus of the third phase of the project will be the development and evaluation of trial learning packages. The packages would be designed for use to meet the strategic goals and objectives of the Tropical Savannas CRC in conjunction with other regional stakeholders and target groups. Where possible it is envisaged established partnerships will be used to ensure that the resources developed will be appropriate for target groups.

The analysis will identify key themes from the qualitative interview data. A positivist approach will be used to interpret data collected to triangulate interviewee perceptions with practice and contextual data reviewed earlier (Silverman 1993, Singleton *et al* 1993). A range of appropriate statistical analysis tools will be employed to interpret and review the data in its context (Rose & Sullivan 1996).

The thesis paper which results from this will provide a full discussion of the results and the relationship between contextual factors and the case study data as well as a full review of any other outputs produced. It is also anticipated that there will be opportunity for a number of publications and further research projects that can build on this research.

The project builds on research conducted by CRLRA (2000, 2001a, 2001b) that reviews the role of VET in regional Australia which found that social outcomes were significant for several regional Australian communities. It also builds on research by others who have researched the field of VET and rural / regional community sustainability (e.g. Balatti & Falk 2001, Falk 2001; Falk, Golding & Balatti 2000) and draws on specific research already conducted by the Tropical Savannas CRC about VET as it relates to the stakeholders of the savanna region (Arnott 2000; Fell 2000).

Project timing

The anticipated schedule for the phases of the project's completion is outlined below.

Phase 1—Literature review and data analysis: October 2003

The structure of the project in terms of development of the detailed methodology and site identification will be determined to a large extent by review of literature and an extensive overview of existing quantitative data. The initial analysis phase will be conducted concurrently with a more extensive review of literature which will aid the process of site identification and instrument design. Ethics applications will made at the conclusion of this phase.

Phase 2—Site identification, data collection: September 2004

Allowing for the possibility that field work may involve travel to remote communities it is expected that data collection will be limited to the period of the dry season in 2004. Preparation for visits and identification of potential participants will be arranged well in advance during the preceding wet season.

Phase 3—Analysis, completion of project outputs: September 2005

The final phase will involve collation of data, analysis and finalisation of outputs (see Objectives and outputs, page 2).

Ethical considerations

The research methodology requires an evaluation of VET stakeholder perceptions through semi-structured interviews. Therefore approval from the Human Ethics Committee will be sought. Application to the Ethics committee will be made at the conclusion of Phase 1 of the project (see Phase 1—Literature review and data analysis: October 2003, page 6).

Intellectual ownership

There are no intellectual property issues outside the scope of NTU's Intellectual Property Policy (ID 940).

Non-English languages

It is intended that subjects would be English speakers. In the event that non-English speakers needed to be used appropriate interpretation services would be sought.

Resource implications

Resource implications are dependent to some extent on location of sites for use in the study. Some travel and communication costs for data gathering would necessarily be included in the costing of the proposal. An estimate of costs is included below. A more detailed budget will be submitted by September 2003.

2003

Item	Estimated cost
Project development travel and accommodation costs for site identification, reporting requirements, presentation of papers, conferences	$5,000

2004

Item	Estimated cost
Travel to sites for interviews, reporting and presentation, seminars and conferences	$3,000
Costs associated with access to sites and interviewing respondents	$2,000

2005

Item	Estimated cost
Travel and accommodation costs for reporting and presentation, seminars and conferences	$2,500
Costs associated with publications, preparation of training resources and other outputs	$2,500

Additional funding

At the time of writing, no external funding requirement is anticipated.

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACE	Adult and Community Education
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
AFFA	Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry Australia
ALNARC	Australian Literacy and Numeracy Research Consortium
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
ASCED	Australian Standard Classification of Education
ATEA	Australian Teacher Education Association
AVETRA	Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association
BRS	Bureau of Rural Sciences
CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
CRLRA	Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia
DEET	(Northern Territory) Department of Employment, Education and Training
DETYA	(Commonwealth) Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
DSDSCA	(Northern Territory) Department of Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs
EHS	(NTU Faculty of) Education, Science and Health
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd
NTDE	Northern Territory Department of Education
NTETA	Northern Territory Education and Training Authority
NTU	Northern Territory University
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RFCD	Research Field Code Description
RIRDC	Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation
TS-CRC	Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre
VET	Vocational Education and Training