

Advancing equity: Merging 'bottom up' initiatives with 'top down' strategies

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The author/project team was funded to undertake this research via a grant under the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program. These grants are awarded to organisations through a competitive process, in which NCVER does not participate.

The NVETRE program is coordinated and managed by NCVER on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments with funding provided through the Department of Education, Science and Training. This program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector. For further information about the program go to the NCVER website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

ISBN 978 1 921170 02 7 print edition

ISBN 978 1 921170 08 9 web edition

TD/TNC 89.01

Published by NCVER

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Foreword

This project forms part of the national program of vocational education and training (VET) research managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments.

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that help successful equity initiatives, which had been ‘seeded’ in technical and further education (TAFE) institutes through short-term funding, to take root and spread. Therefore this study will be of interest to a wide range of audiences, including senior and middle managers in VET providers, access and equity practitioners, policy-makers and funding agencies, community groups, and local industry with an interest in assisting those with learning difficulties and other disadvantages to realise their potential.

The report is significant because it found that the short-term trial-funding model used currently places too much emphasis on starting initiatives and not enough on the development and scale-up of promising ones. A longer-term and more investment-oriented funding framework is required. It also found that leadership in equity provision can start outside the provider. In fact, several of the most vibrant initiatives studied had been instigated by local businesses, industry and welfare agencies. Partnerships are therefore very important to the success and sustainability of equity initiatives.

Readers interested in implementing access and equity programs to address learning and other disadvantages are pointed to other projects in this area.

- ✧ Mawer, G & Jackson, E 2006, *Dusting off the shelves: Getting the most out of vocational education and training equity resources*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- ✧ Allison, J, Gorringer, S & Lacey, J 2006, *Building learning communities: Partnerships, social capital and VET performance*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- ✧ Miller, C 2005, *Aspects of training that meet Indigenous Australians’ aspirations: A systematic review of research*, NCVER, Adelaide.

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Managing Director, NCVER

Acknowledgements

Our original intention was neither to identify the people we spoke to in the course of this research, nor even to name the technical and further education (TAFE) institutes where we conducted the bulk of our fieldwork. Our reasoning was that we were not conducting case studies but looking for patterns, and so there was no need to identify sources. In large measure this was the case. However, there were a few specific stories which we believed needed to be included if this report were to be useful—stories which could not be told without identifying the parties involved.

So, with the agreement of the institutes, we are pleased to identify the six fieldwork sites, not least because it allows us to acknowledge the special assistance given to us by the ‘research associate’ at each TAFE site (see p.20) and others who were instrumental in sponsoring the research:

- ✧ Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE, Shepparton: Angela McLeod (research associate) and Russell Francis
- ✧ Gordon Institute of TAFE, Geelong: Judy Shea (research associate) and Martha Kinsman
- ✧ Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE: Frances Coppolillo (research associate)
- ✧ Pilbara Institute of TAFE: Jenni McConnell (research associate) and Don Webster
- ✧ TAFE NSW Hunter Institute: Kate Rose (research associate) and Louise King
- ✧ TAFESA, Adelaide North: Michelle Potts (research associate from October 2005), Sarah Marshall (research associate to October 2005) and Adrian Marron.

The problem in naming these few people is that there were others at these sites who were also wonderfully committed to the project and whose willingness to think through what we might need enriched the research enormously. The outcome would have been different, and poorer, had we not had their help. Even with others on site whom we may have met only once, we still made real demands on their time and, in a sense, on their privacy, because we probed for aspects of their experience that revealed weaknesses as well as strengths. They responded honestly and thoughtfully. We want to express here our great appreciation; their input has informed our thinking.

Besides the TAFE fieldwork sites, to help us identify interesting equity initiatives, we spoke to another hundred or so individuals. Some of those encounters were only brief, and by phone, although even here some conversations were quite extensive. We also visited two private registered training organisations, several community-based organisations, employers, some key individuals in three state education and training departments and a few practitioners involved with equity programs in other TAFE institutes. All are owed sincere thanks.

We would also like to acknowledge the role of the National Centre for Vocational Education research (NCVER). It has managed to be a critical and supportive friend during the course of this project, as well as an exacting contractor.

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Key messages

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors which help successful equity initiatives that had been ‘seeded’ in technical and further education (TAFE) institutes through short-term funding to ‘take root and spread’. Overall, we found such initiatives lack cohesion and their spread was minimal. Equity clients are those who need extra support because they are disadvantaged in relation to learning.

- ✧ The cause of equity appears to have lost ground during the past decade of vocational education and training (VET) reform. Many are of the view that equity needs to be reinstated as a priority principle in the sector, in line with the social justice foundations of VET established by Kangan in 1974.
- ✧ Funds allocated through short-term pilot equity initiatives have been primarily used to purchase direct support for learners, including a substantial increase in teacher-to-student ratios. This individual support for disadvantaged clients—often with multiple disadvantages—results in good outcomes. However, the initiatives rarely permeate into the institutes to the extent of influencing other practitioners.
- ✧ The most successful initiatives are those which had been established by people in the community rather than by government or government agencies, ‘outsiders’ who had a long-term commitment to the specific equity group.
- ✧ The funding model—‘seed funding’—is flawed. One-off pilot projects rarely generate ongoing provision. Furthermore, pilot projects need to be systematically applied in other contexts to test their long-term applicability.
- ✧ Policy-makers and funding bodies responsible for equity in the VET sector need to rethink the funding mechanisms currently used to stimulate innovative equity practice.

Executive summary

The purpose of this research was to investigate the way in which short-term funded ‘pilot’ equity initiatives permeate the technical and further education (TAFE) institutes where they were seeded. The term ‘merging’ in the title refers to the relationship between practitioners’ successful initiatives and the policies of their institutes, an association which enables good new practice to flourish.

Before turning to the particular findings and conclusions, we would like to highlight a message we heard time and time again during the study. It is that the cause of equity seems to have lost traction during the past decade of vocational education and training (VET) reform. This was not intentional, but attention has been directed elsewhere. There is a widespread sense that the sector needs, as a priority, to reinstate equity as a matter of *principle*, in line with the social justice foundations of VET laid down by Kangan in 1974. A return to equity is also an infinitely practical matter because there is every indication that there will be an influx of equity clients into VET, primarily due to federal legislation (the 2005 *Disability Standards Act* and the *Welfare to Work* legislation introduced in mid-2006). In addition, there have been changes to the effective school leaving age—that is, the ‘formal education leaving age’—which are in place in two states and pending in others.

It might be useful, too, to explain how we define ‘equity’ clients. They are those who need extra support because they are *disadvantaged in relation to learning*—disadvantaged because of poor literacy or a lack of confidence, or a sense of cultural alienation in a TAFE institute or other provider. This specifically avoids the language of target equity groups because not all Indigenous people, not all mature-aged and not all women have special needs when it comes to learning in VET. Even where people in these ‘equity populations’ have special needs, not all have the same special need. Neither do we take a general ‘managing diversity’ perspective, because in that perspective—which views all clients as having needs—the very idea of disadvantage is lost. Yet educational disadvantage is alive and well and needs specifically to be addressed.

Merging ‘bottom up’ practice with ‘top down’ strategies within TAFE institutes

The language of ‘bottom’ and ‘top’ is shorthand for the equity knowledge, practices and intentions of practitioners (at the ‘bottom’) as distinct from the equity understandings, strategies, and intentions of senior executives (at the ‘top’). It was pleasing to find that the bottoms and tops in all six TAFE institutes that constituted the fieldwork sites for this study were united in their desire to find mechanisms for aligning equity practice and strategy that will work more effectively than currently, and lead to improved outcomes for equity clients.

The research program was designed to produce a set of evidence-based protocols which would help organisations merge effective bottom-up practice with top-down strategy, and vice versa, although constructing a formal set of such guidelines at this stage would go beyond the evidence acquired. What the evidence has allowed us to do is to identify promising mechanisms for aligning top and bottom. These mechanisms constitute a well-grounded series of tasks for experimenting

(action research) within TAFE institutes and within other interested registered training organisations. The tasks include:

- ✧ *Identifying specific issues or problems in the institute which interfere with attempts to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners:* several examples were mentioned, including poor articulation between pre-vocational equity programs and vocational programs, and uncertainty about the appropriateness of cross-subsidising programs for disadvantaged learners from other income streams. These are issues that might be productively tackled at the local level.
- ✧ *Identifying the few individuals adept at boundary-crossing and connecting with many:* in its more recent, more interesting form, knowledge-brokering is concerned with bringing people together and helping them to build relationships, uncover needs and share ideas amongst themselves, all of which will help them do their jobs better.
- ✧ *Addressing inconsistencies in accountability measures:* there are necessary differences in the accountability requirements in staff in different levels in TAFE institutes. A way of overcoming this problem is through an outcomes hierarchy. This is a template for constructing a set of outcomes which start from those which practitioners find most germane to their work with equity clients (for example, improved attendance, completing work), progressing to those indicators the system is most concerned with (for example, qualifications, employment). The important point is that an outcomes hierarchy, without dismantling established key performance indicator regimes, allows people working at different positions in a system to tell their ‘equity story’ in ways that make most sense to them.
- ✧ *Strengthening practitioner collaboration:* practitioners working with disadvantaged learners themselves need to be supported. One of the most effective resources for this is each other, but they need time and opportunities for sustained conversation and trust-building.

These tasks, undertaken systematically and widely through the sector, with the experiences collected *in detail*, would build the foundation upon which formal advice—perhaps an interactive electronic guide—could be developed which would help ensure that the equity insights and ambitions of practitioners and those of management cohere and reinforce one another.

The ‘seed funding’ model for equity initiatives

Studying the influence of short-term funded equity initiatives on their institutes was, in effect, to study the funding model itself. The model, which has been used repeatedly in equity provision, offers practitioners extra funds for a limited time, typically 12 months, to test the value of some new approach. The theory is that successful initiatives will show practitioners what they can accomplish, and consequently they will continue the practice.

In the equity initiatives we studied, the funds were primarily used to purchase direct support for learners, including a substantial increase in teacher-to-student ratios; an expansion of the range of adults who worked with the students, including individual mentoring; and sometimes an extension of course duration. With this additional support, disadvantaged clients, many of whom were burdened with multiple and complex barriers to successful learning, achieved good outcomes. However, only a few initiatives permeated far into their institutes—to influence either other practitioners or institute policy and resource allocation.

The problem—the fact that the new practice stops once funding stops—lies with the funding model itself and the theory that one-off ‘pilot’ funds can generate ongoing provision. What the initiatives actually piloted was the use and usefulness of extra support for disadvantaged learners and their teachers. The extra resources were an essential ingredient. Unless that level of resourcing is maintained or obtained from another source, there is no nutrient for its continuance. That much is obvious.

There is a second flaw in the theory, which practitioners were at pains to point out. Even the most experienced said they needed to try a new practice in several contexts with different students if they

were to learn how to make best use of the extra resources. Even 12 months with one small group—and often the ‘trial’ lasts for fewer than 12 months—is still only the beginning of the learning curve.

Of the ten initiatives we studied, what is notable is that three of the most effective and long-lived had been initiated by people in the community rather than by government or government agencies. In one case it was a small business established to employ young people with a disability; in another, mining companies in the Pilbara were interested in building a local Indigenous workforce; and in the third, an independent welfare agency was supporting disengaged youths. In all three cases the ‘outsiders’ had a long-term commitment to the equity group in question—an imperative, in fact, to succeed. They were not interested merely in piloting, but in ensuring that good practice lasted and grew.

The inevitable conclusion is that policy-makers and funding agents responsible for equity in the VET sector need to rethink the funding mechanisms currently used to stimulate innovative equity practice. The current model, which churns through one kind of extra support for equity clients and their teachers one year, another kind the next year, and so on, effectively returns people to square one after the funding has been withdrawn or has moved on. It is useful for sparking innovation, but an investment mindset is required if effective new practices are to grow and develop, develop and spread until there are real changes to outcomes.

An ecological perspective

We began the study with a metaphorical use of the language of ecology. The initial proposal for this project likened short-term funded initiatives to the introduction of an intruder into a TAFE ecosystem. It continued to be a useful metaphor throughout the fieldwork. It should be noted that the research trialled a number of methods for gaining an understanding of the experiences and thinking of the many practitioners and managers we talked to. These approaches included using cultural probes, story-telling, relationship-mapping and metaphor elicitation (asking people to use metaphors to describe their experiences). We found that asking people what kind of ecosystem their TAFE resembled really engaged them and encouraged them to think most creatively. It seems that an ecological perspective—even at a rather superficial metaphorical level—is a useful tool for stimulating insightful thinking about interactions and feedback loops, both real and possible, within TAFE institutes.

An ecological perspective is, however, more than a metaphorical tool. As the preceding sections indicate, we had to look *outside* TAFE institutes—to the agencies that fund equity initiatives and to their local communities—if we were to understand what was happening *inside* the institutes. The larger ecosystems in which institutes are embedded are a fundamental part of the picture. It is hardly surprising that the overarching VET systems (state and federal) influence internal TAFE ecosystems and their capacity to respond to equity clients. What has perhaps not been so well appreciated is the very positive role that the local community ecosystem can play, especially if the nature of the relationship between community and institute is made more equal, more reciprocal.

The three initiatives which were instigated by businesses or agencies in the local community developed eventual partnerships with TAFE institutes. These were not the traditional type, where each party comes to the table with a well-defined role and carries out its part of the bargain. Rather, in these partnerships the boundaries were blurred and interactions fluid. People couldn’t remember who had thought of what first. Even the notion of leveraging resources seems inappropriate; pooling resources gives a better sense of what was happening. One informant calls these partnerships ‘hybrids’ because neither side operates as it had previously. From an ecological perspective the partners have been transformed into new creatures. It was noticeable that these community-initiated developments were stimulating more changes within TAFE institutes than were government pilot programs.

Systems thinking is another approach to understanding the internal and external interactions of organisations, as it also emphasises the interdependence of distinct elements in large systems and the dynamic tensions which result. An ecological perspective, however, worked best in our study, perhaps because it is more organic and is intuitively grasped. An ecological perspective certainly provided an exceptionally robust foundation for the many dimensions of our project. It might serve others in the VET sector equally well.

Background to the study

One of the principal strategies for improving vocational education and training (VET) outcomes for equity groups has been to provide targeted funds that enable VET practitioners (either alone or in partnerships) to design and experiment with new approaches. The funding is understood to be ‘seed’ funding for a limited time and is intended to test whether the initiative ‘works’. The arrangement has proved productive, as demonstrated by the sheer number of ‘good’ practice and ‘best’ practice innovations which have been stimulated by the process (for example, ANTA 2004; 2005; McKenna 2004; Bedson 2004).

The research team has observed these initiatives over the years from a number of perspectives. We count among the team members: technical and further education (TAFE) managers, VET practitioners, independent researchers, senior policy advisers, a social justice consultant, business strategists and a journalist. In these varied capacities we have mused about the extent to which short-term support for practitioner initiatives leads to long-term change. This is a concern shared by others. People often talk informally about initiatives that decayed after project funding had terminated and/or the initial champion moved on.

It is generally assumed that the effectiveness of the ‘seeding’—whether or not the initiative served as a catalyst for long-term change—is dependent on the training organisation’s willingness or capacity to sponsor the new practice. The research reported here sought to test that assumption by studying the way in which a few TAFE institutes responded to successful practitioner equity initiatives. That is where the language of ‘bottom up’ and ‘top down’ originated. Practitioners on the ground, through the temporary grant of additional resources, introduce new ways of teaching, training and supporting disadvantaged learners. Our interest was in what happens at the interface between the new practices and the policies, culture and structures put in place by institute leaders. How do the knowledge, intentions and practices of practitioners at ‘the bottom’ of a TAFE institute merge with the knowledge, intentions and strategies of managers at ‘the top’?

The original proposal cited work on systems thinking as a possible base for understanding how innovative changes by some individuals or groups are accommodated by the system in which they operate. Formal systems thinking, however, tends to be complex and mechanistic. Ecology offers a similar perspective to systems thinking—similar in its insistence that any single significant change will perturb many elements in the system—but ecology feels more organic and is intuitive. From an ecological perspective, asking how TAFE institutes respond to practitioner initiatives is not dissimilar to investigating the way(s) an ecosystem responds to any new ‘intruding’ species. In fact, we found an ecological perspective to be extremely powerful, both for us as researchers and for people we talked to in the course of the study.

An ecological perspective is not an entirely new idea in the VET sector. The national ‘blueprint strategies’ for Indigenous learners (ANTA 2000a) and learners with a disability (ANTA 2000b) imply that, where effective innovation and practice are developed, the ‘host’ institution needs to adapt to allow the new practice to flourish and further develop. Both Robert Bean and Banduk Marika and her colleagues make the same point, although not in those words, in their respective contributions to *Equity in vocational education and training: Research readings* (Bowman 2004). The High

Level Review of Training Packages (Schofield & McDonald 2004) discusses at some length the importance of ‘collaborative cultures’ if the sector is to flourish.

It is important to note that this was an empirical study with the practical purpose of understanding what might help practitioners, middle managers and senior executives to more effectively combine their respective expertise and roles to the task of meeting the needs of disadvantaged clients. It necessarily also explored the ways in which funds, intended to improve the VET experience and outcomes of these clients, might be better conceptualised and applied. These ambitions are in line with a shift emerging in equity research noted by McIntyre et al. (2004, p.9). They describe a redirection from a focus on the barriers to the participation of various disadvantaged groups in VET to the outcomes achieved through that participation and strategies which lead to improved outcomes.

Broader issues

Three further issues define the context of this research. They are discussed in the remainder of this chapter:

- ✧ a long-term vision for equity in VET
- ✧ tension between an equity or diversity focus
- ✧ innovation as a feature of equity provision.

A long-term vision for equity in VET

The vocational education and training reforms of the past decade have focused on building an industry-driven system. The decade has also seen substantial improvements to access and equity. There is, nonetheless, a widespread belief that the industry focus has eclipsed the sector’s social purpose of countering disadvantage (Considine, Watson & Hall 2005; McIntyre et al. 2004; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1998; ANTA 1998). No one wishes to undo the valuable changes which have come from repositioning the role of industry within the VET system. However, the reports cited urge a rebalancing so that the system’s social and educative purpose and its role in developing a skilled workforce rank equally, and are seen as complementary.

The people in TAFE institutes we spoke to in this study—practitioner and senior executives alike—consistently said they would like to see equity provision to be broader and deeper than it is today. Their frequent reference to ‘Kangan’ is itself instructive. It was as if our informants had recently dusted off their copies to remind themselves of its unequivocal intent:

Opportunities throughout life for recurrent education should give priority to the needs of the individual as a person and to his or her development as a member of society, including the development of non-vocational and social skills that affect personality ...

There are at least two alternatives to the emphases that can be given to the purpose of technical colleges and like institutions. A manpower orientation expresses their purpose as being to produce the skilled manpower necessary to the development of the economy. An educational and social emphasis is on their function to enable people to develop their potential as individuals but within the realities of the job opportunities by means of which they are aiming to use their education to earn a livelihood. The Committee has adopted the educational and social purpose of technical and further education as the more appropriate, without overlooking TAFE’s vital manpower role. (Kangan 1974, p.xvii)

The Kangan Report provided more than an orientation for the VET system, it created a vision. Occasionally our informants actually talked about the lack of a clear vision for what a socially

purposed VET system would look like. More often, the wish for a vision could be distilled from their comments. One was particularly memorable:

The daily pressures in working with disadvantaged clients is intense but even when we get a moment to lift our heads above the parapet, there is nothing there to see.

Defining a 10- or 20-year horizon—what might be seen above the parapet—is neither an easy nor well-defined task. There is no shortage of equity strategies at national, state and territory, and organisational levels, so what is wanted is somehow different from the current planning guides. Ewart Keep from the United Kingdom has written that ‘unless and until we have a much clearer vision of what we want to achieve, above and beyond vague concepts, we are unlikely to get where we want to be’. He thinks there is:

... a terrible tendency to move straight from ill-specified macro level goals [in his example, a knowledge-driven economy] to narrowly defined policy intervention or targets without any intervening stage of conceptualizing how said programme/target will actually contribute to, or even hinder, achieving the goal. (E Keep 2006, pers. comm.)

There is a model for building a ‘contextualised vision’ which addresses Keep’s concerns and those of our informants. It comes from work on environmental sustainability and defines a hierarchy of outcomes which makes explicit the assumptions about how each step (program or target) leads to the ultimate vision (New South Wales Department of Conservation and Environment 2004).

Our reading of the research literature and VET policy, and the input from our informants all suggest that a clear actionable vision is needed to shift the inequities that continue to burden the disadvantaged. This is especially important in light of the expected influx of more disadvantaged clients into VET resulting from the federal *Welfare to Work* legislation, which came into effect in July 2006, as well as the requirement in a number of jurisdictions that young people participate in education and training until they have gained the equivalent of Year 12 certification (which in Queensland, for example, is defined as a certificate III vocational qualification) or turn 17, or obtain full-time employment. The persistence of inequity forms part of the context for our study.

Tension between an equity or diversity focus

There has been debate in the VET sector about whether it is preferable to focus on equity for defined target groups and develop special programs for these groups, or to manage diversity and recognise that every client has needs (so why identify particular groups and treat them as more special than other clients). McIntyre et al. 2004 provide case studies of each strategy; Bean (2004) argues the case for replacing special equity programs with diversity management. Considine, Watson and Hall (2005), McIntyre et al. (2004) and Watson et al. (2000) point out that both approaches have embedded a range of philosophical and historical connotations in them and in many ways converge in their concern for inclusive practice. One practitioner in our study described this fundamental concern elegantly:

What is inclusive practice? It’s when the people who need to be included don’t notice it.
Whatever way you do it.

The health sector offers a fresh perspective on whether ‘special needs’ clients are best considered as separate groups or part of the naturally diverse range of patients. One member of the research team was involved with the women’s health centres set up in the 1970s and 1980s. The separate centres developed real expertise in meeting women’s health needs. Having developed this special expertise, the question then came up: did they need to stay separate? Some centres made a deliberate effort to integrate themselves into the mainstream, with the result that the specialism was maintained but co-located with a range of health services. Others opted to remain outside the general health provision. Eventually the special funding for the women’s centres was terminated. Staff who had worked at those which hadn’t integrated went individually into the mainstream and their personal knowledge continued to be used, but it wasn’t systematic, and the learning accumulated by the group decayed. The lesson for health has been that, at a particular moment in

time when enough has been learned about working with a special group, then it is time to integrate, as has happened more recently with HIV AIDS.

In the VET sector it is not clear what a transition point—where one might shift from ‘special equity’ to ‘managing diversity’—would look like. In fact, it may be better to discard both the concept of ‘targeted equity groups’ and that of ‘managing diversity’, since both, it could be argued, inadequately conceptualise the disadvantages faced by individuals. The equity groups approach tends to over-simplify and homogenise disadvantage; the managing diversity approach tends to sidestep the very concept of disadvantage.

It may be more productive to think about the disadvantages which clients—or potential clients—face *as learners* as distinct from ‘equity’ or ‘diversity’ being associated with ethnicity, age, gender or other population characteristics. There is sound evidence for suggesting this middle ground approach.

- ✧ Equity target groups are not well defined: not all women nor all Indigenous people, for example, need special support to engage in VET-based learning, but some do because they are burdened by past (and too often continuing) disadvantage which limits *their ability to learn*.
- ✧ Individuals often belong to more than one equity group, living within intersecting areas of disadvantage. This situation requires a more broadly integrated response than past and current approaches which tend to be framed to cater for clients who have status within only one equity group.
- ✧ Grouping clients in terms of the disadvantages which impinge on learning allows boundaries to become more flexible at the same time that patterns of disadvantage are recognised. One experienced former equity manager in our study gave, inadvertently, a sound educational reason for grouping traditionally defined ‘equity clients’ together:

It is because the wellspring that will give them confidence, inspiration even, differs among groups. For disengaged youth, it is a fresh start and identifying a future. For many Indigenous youth it is a preparedness to see the future. Refugees and migrants need stepping stones through to vocational pathways. Mature-age unemployed people need to see they are still of value and can contribute. People with a disability often need a chance to explore and succeed.
- ✧ When an individual is trying to learn, the disadvantages they suffer—whether limited literacy, homelessness, poor health, lack of confidence etc.—tend to be magnified and compounded. Learning is a big ask if one is poorly prepared or diverted by other concerns.
- ✧ Grouping clients according to the disadvantages they face in learning may also generate teaching environments that build social capital amongst the learners. This kind of social capital is increasingly being recognised as a significant factor in successful learning (Balatti, Black & Falk in press).

Overall, the evidence suggests that reframing both equity and diversity as *disadvantages in learning* may help to more adequately define the nature and costs of the additional support(s) needed to meet ‘equity’ clients’ expectations. That possibility has led us in the research to burrow down into the precise ways in which practitioners and training providers come to understand the array of needs of disadvantaged clients and make the trade-offs that might be required to sustain improved provision and support.

Innovation as a feature of equity provision

There is a strange mismatch between the drive for innovation in equity provision and the consistent refrain from the best practitioners that good equity practice is not rocket science. The insistence on innovation may be attributed in part to the global economic mantra that innovation is essential. Walker (2004) points out that innovation is the most widely researched area in the social sciences: a 1994 study noted 2000 papers on organisational innovation; a 1995 study reported 3000 on the diffusion of innovation. Pickersgill (2005) has taken an historical perspective on dimensions of innovation in Australian vocational education and training.

The drive for innovation in equity provision may also be the result of a slight confusion between being *innovative* and developing product or process *innovations* for the market. It is the former that characterises leading equity practitioners: staying fresh, responsive to what might work best today or tomorrow, being alert to possibilities. The practitioner initiatives that turned up in our study were ‘not radically new’—to repeat a sentiment many expressed—but almost all improved outcomes for disadvantaged learners.

Disseminating knowledge about improved practices has become more sophisticated since the classic agricultural extension studies of the 1930s (Ryan & Ross 1943 in Stevenson 2003; Rogers 1995) and the typecasting of potential users as early adopters, laggards etc. The shift has been from disseminating information that describes good practice to materials actively designed to help others to apply what was originally learned. There are some salient examples from the Australian VET sector. Among them are the Working with Diversity website (WestOne) and the materials produced by Wodonga TAFE for working with students with mild intellectual disabilities. The new-style information even tries to convey the emotional character that is part and parcel of change.

A more recent development in improving the spread and take-up of innovative practice is to insert a collaborative ‘adaptation’ phase in the process. Potential users are recruited to actively engage in the refinement and extension of the innovative practice. Three ways of conceptualising the process which have informed our study are:

- ✧ *The plausible promise model:* Douthwaite and colleagues (2001, 2002) provide a road map for improving the spread of innovation by beginning merely with a ‘plausible promise’ but selecting pilot sites where the need for innovation is high. In ‘equal partnership’ the initial promise is tested and refined until it becomes a viable product.
- ✧ *The testable idea model:* a mechanism which is proving effective in enhancing the take-up of best-practice health care is the creation of multidisciplinary projects designed to place practitioners in a range of settings to work out how best to apply the essential element(s) of a new practice to achieve improved outcomes in their circumstances. Multi-disciplinary means administrative as well as clinical staff.
- ✧ *The knowledge-brokering model:* here knowledge brokering is being seen as a *collaborative* enterprise, not simply the responsibility of individual brokers. The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation is sponsoring systematic and original research on knowledge brokering:

Knowledge brokering is about bringing people together, to help them build relationships, uncover needs and share ideas and evidence that will let them do their jobs better. It is the human force that makes knowledge transfer (the movement of knowledge from one place or group of people to another) more effective ... brokering occurs even without individuals dedicated to the task so it is important to focus on the activities and processes, not solely on individuals.
(Canadian Health Services Research Foundation 2003)

This trend to seeing process and service innovation as an issue of continuous improvement and not the production of ‘silver bullets’ to resolve all problems is particularly important in VET equity initiatives. It should serve to dampen expectations that breakthroughs are imminent.

Findings: Trial methodologies

In the original proposal we identified the fieldwork stage as one that would benefit from experimenting with an array of tools if we were to obtain a sufficiently nuanced picture of the thinking and experiences of our informants. Thus, one of the research questions the project formally proposed was:

Among the tools which have been used to gauge the culture of organisations—for example, cultural probes, story-telling, the use of metaphor, relationship mapping and policy ‘impact’ filters—do some lend themselves particularly well to investigating VET organisations and their interactions and, if so, how exactly?

Turning one aspect of the methodology into a piece of action research affected the tenor of the whole project. Each stage became more open to imaginative possibilities. Three areas yielded particularly interesting insights:

- ✧ identifying initiatives and fieldwork sites—because the process revealed differences in the knowledge networks of the different equity groups
- ✧ negotiating with the TAFE institutes—because it showed the keen interest in improving equity provision and internal linkages
- ✧ using, or trying to use, innovative fieldwork tools (later called evocative tasks).

Before considering these three ‘researched’ aspects of the methodology, it may be useful to outline the flow of the project. The majority of the research was fieldwork conducted at the six TAFE institutes. That fieldwork involved:

- ✧ several visits to the institutes
- ✧ extended and repeated discussions with practitioners, middle managers and senior executives
- ✧ discussions with stakeholders outside the institute (at all but one site)
- ✧ a two-day synthesis workshop at the conclusion of data collection, which was also attended by the research associates from the TAFE institute sites
- ✧ an iterative process for reviewing the analysis and report drafts.

Identifying initiatives: Knowledge networks within equity domains

The original proposal stated that the TAFE institute fieldwork sites would be those where there were, or had been, especially good and interesting equity initiatives, as these might reasonably be expected to have permeated the organisation. We could have relied on the team’s extensive knowledge and contacts in the VET sector to identify sites. Instead, we decided to approach the task systematically by asking equity clients themselves or agencies which represented them what had met their needs. The equity groups contacted were: Indigenous people, people with a disability, disengaged youth, refugees, people with low literacy and numeracy, mature-age unemployed, and prisoners. As well as shaping the final selection, the process yielded an insight into the knowledge

infrastructure of the different equity domains. This is an interesting and, as far as we are aware, novel finding in its own right.

Knowledge infrastructure of equity domains

It had been assumed that contacting peak bodies and advisory committees in each of the equity domains would lead more or less directly to promising initiatives. The actual trail to initiatives was more complex than that and different for each equity group. A comparison between the search for initiatives for Indigenous learners and initiatives for disengaged youth illustrates the extremes of the range.

Locating initiatives that worked for Indigenous learners

There are strong networks amongst Indigenous people interested in vocational education and training. This is due, in part at least, to the establishment of Indigenous education consultative bodies in each state and territory in the 1980s by the Australian Government. Over the years several have evolved into well-defined systems that directly link local, regional and state peak Indigenous bodies. Victoria is a good example. The Wurreker strategy there explicitly connects local Aboriginal consultative groups with eight regional brokers and with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated. The association, in turn, is a formal partner in the planning of VET in Victoria. As a consequence, the association could easily identify for us the registered training organisations which provided ‘interesting’ programs, those which were improving their provision and so on.

Even in jurisdictions where the formal Indigenous VET network is not as highly organised as in Victoria, the fact that ‘degrees of separation’ amongst Indigenous people active in working to improve things for their communities are small made it relatively easy to find individuals who had a reasonably clear view of where things were working well.

Locating initiatives that worked for disengaged youth

The fragmentation of the ‘at risk’ youth sector is well recognised and has been a cause for concern for some time (Prime Minister’s Youth Pathways Taskforce 2001). Our experience suggests that the situation has not improved markedly, perhaps because the youth domain is so wide and hard to define.

The official non-government youth peak bodies in each state and territory represent a diverse range of agencies and organisations. When asked for examples of initiatives, most tended to give vague responses, with the advice, ‘you really need to talk to someone at the registered training organisation’. A posting on the Youth Affairs Research Network netted a dozen leads, but many were simply suppositions that the local TAFE was doing something and we should contact it. Regional organisations like the local learning and employment networks in Victoria and the National Youth Commitments (Dusseldorp Skills Foundation) were of mixed help.

It became apparent that to know what is happening on the ground for disengaged youth, one has to drill down into each local community. In fact, when we eventually got to know a few communities because they became fieldwork sites, it was clear that even at the local level, agencies and institutions (including VET providers) working to support ‘at risk’ and disengaged youth tend not to be well connected.

Other groups

The search for initiatives that worked well for people with a disability, refugees and other equity groups fell in between the extremes described above: the tightly coupled and knowledgeable Indigenous networks on the one hand, and the fragmentation of people working with disengaged youth on the other. The disability area was interesting in that there are multiple but parallel networks. Many organisations operate to support and advocate for people with disabilities. These

tend to focus on a particular disability in a specified geographic region; thus, their knowledge is deep, but not broad. We also found a handful of individuals who, through experience in working with people with disabilities and serving in national roles, have acquired a clear overview of training initiatives—but the knowledge resides in them as individuals rather than in the domain itself. Mature-age workers who are unemployed have almost no voice at all.

Our picture of the differences in the knowledge infrastructure of the different equity domains is preliminary, but the fact that these differences have not been the subject of discussion, let alone of systematic study, seems to us an oversight that needs to be corrected. In particular, it would be interesting to understand whether these differences are reflected in the advocacy capacity of the different groups or even whether their voice is heard on important issues that affect delivery of services. The differences amongst the groups may also be responsible for the difficulty policy-makers and researchers alike face in trying to identify effective equity practice *systematically* and *reliably*.

Site selection

One TAFE institute housed initiatives which were commended repeatedly and by different equity groups, so it was an obvious choice. Many other institutes had one or two nominated initiatives and we were faced with the task of how to select from amongst them. We decided to look for initiatives that came from different sources, believing that this would place the institutes in different ecosystems. For example, one institute was chosen because the recommended initiative had been initiated by a private enterprise; another because the initiative was a response to a state government strategy; and so on. In other words, rather than the ecology being confined to the internal dynamics of the institute, the ecological scale was expanded to include the driving force behind the nominated initiatives.

The six TAFE institutes that emerged from the process were:

- ✧ Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE, Shepparton, Victoria
- ✧ Gordon Institute of TAFE, Geelong, Victoria
- ✧ Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, Melbourne, Victoria
- ✧ Pilbara Institute of TAFE, Roebourne campus, Western Australia
- ✧ TAFE NSW Hunter Institute, Newcastle, New South Wales
- ✧ TAFESA, Adelaide North, South Australia.

Two initiatives that sounded interesting were outside the six selected fieldwork sites. Each had been significantly shaped by an individual outside the TAFE concerned. We visited each on two occasions and they provided further insight into these broad (TAFE plus community) ecologies.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) had requested that two private registered training organisations be included in the study. The two selected were:

- ✧ a large national enterprise-based registered training organisation with an fine reputation for training a diverse workforce, where some 15% of the workers had poor prior educational backgrounds. We spent a useful half-day on site and they were keen to participate further; however, a suitable time could not be negotiated
- ✧ a small registered training organisation which specialises in the design and implementation of workplace training and has a long history of concern for disadvantaged workers. We had two long discussions with the senior group of training consultants especially focused on the topic of specialist pedagogy. However, the small size of the registered training organisation meant it had little relevance to the question of merging practitioner knowledge and management strategy in large complex organisations.

Because the interaction with the private registered training organisations was so limited compared with the fieldwork at the six TAFE institutes, our study is effectively about TAFE institutes,

referring to the private registered training organisations when useful. It is important to note that putting the private registered training organisations to the side is not because of a distinction between being private or public but a matter of pertinence to the research questions.

Negotiation with TAFE institutes

A single-page invitation went to the six selected TAFE institutes. The invitation included an itemised list of what the on-site fieldwork would entail. That portion read:

- ✧ *researcher visits*: a two-person team from the project would spend a total of 5–6 days across at least on two and, better, three visits between July and October 2005
- ✧ *an experimental, experiential approach*: instead of relying solely on interviews (although we will, of course, be talking with staff), we are putting together a set of ‘evocative tasks’ to stimulate participants to fresh ways of thinking about sustaining equity initiatives
- ✧ *staff time*: time spent by participating staff will depend on the tasks that interest them—our best guess is between three and seven hours all up. The research grant, unfortunately, does not include funds for staff release
- ✧ *staff numbers*: the exact number of TAFE staff involved will depend on the particular experiences in sustaining the learning derived from equity pilot projects at your TAFE: likely around ten individuals (both practitioners and managers)
- ✧ *an on-site ‘mentee’*: NCVER requested we mentor a ‘neophyte researcher’ at each TAFE which is something we are delighted to do. The on-site researcher will be a full member of the project team both on-site and in our teleconference analysis of all findings.

All six of the invited TAFE institutes accepted this invitation without further urging. Occasionally during the research the subject of why they participated so willingly when the demand on precious staff time was great came up. The answers were consistent.

- ✧ They liked the idea of a ‘critical friend’, an outsider, challenging them to reflect on what they do and why.
- ✧ They thought ideas generated within the institute might be a catalyst for internal change.
- ✧ They hoped the research findings might help them improve outcomes for learners from disadvantaged groups.

The concept of a ‘neophyte researcher’ joining the project team at each site appealed to the institutes. The label was changed to ‘research associate’, as the women selected (and all were women as it turned out) were astute experienced practitioners and held management positions—hardly neophytes. The research associates played a valuable role on site by providing background and debriefing with us after interviews and discussions. Four of the six were able to join the project team for the final synthesis workshop. Their input was invaluable.

Innovative fieldwork tools

The four fieldwork tools of prime interest are set out in table 1.

Early fieldwork trials showed it would not be possible to systematically apply the array of tools at each site, as the issues and concerns at each differed, making some relevant, others not. So instead of considering them as four separate tools, we merged them into a single approach and labelled it ‘evocative tasks’. This then opened up the possibility of designing other evocative tasks for individuals and groups tailored to draw out their considered reflections. The following examples indicate the range and tenor of the evocative tasks ‘assigned’.

- ✧ One TAFE institute was presented with a diagram of organisations in the community which had been described by one informant during the first site visit. Selected staff were asked to list the linkages to these groups they used currently to improve outcomes for refugees/migrants, Indigenous learners, and disengaged youth *and* to imagine how these might evolve in the future.
- ✧ Notes of discussions were written up and a series of questions inserted (for example, ‘did you come to that idea gradually?’, ‘was there any disagreement when you first posed this idea?’). The task was to respond to these questions to amplify the initial conversation.
- ✧ One person was asked to describe what she might do, given unlimited funds and ten years, to further the take-up of the innovative practices she had developed and researched.
- ✧ People were asked to think of their institute as an ecosystem into which a promising innovation in working with equity clients had been injected. What elements would come into play to ensure that *something* of this innovation continued to inform the way people work?
- ✧ People were asked to record the ‘journey’ of their involvement with a particular initiative.

Table 1 Potential fieldwork tools

Cultural probes: these are small tasks which participants are asked to complete and return to the researchers—thus the analogy with astronomic or surgical probes sending signals back over time. The best example is the one which the original developers of cultural probes, the Royal College of Art in London, used in researching ways to increase the presence of the elderly in their communities. Among the probes left with the elderly was a disposable camera with instructions to take pictures of, for example, what they planned to wear that day, something they found boring, the first person they saw that day. There were also maps to be marked with places they would go to do certain things (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti 1999).

Most significant change technique: a story-based approach to evaluating initiatives where participants are invited to tell stories about significant changes they believe have taken place because of the initiative. Participants are then involved in discussing the stories and in doing so, become clearer about what they, and others, value as significant change. Participants can invite colleagues and outsiders to join the discussion (Dart & Davies 2003; Dart 2004).

Relationship mapping: here are a number of sophisticated protocols for mapping networks and relationships (e.g. Krebs 1998; Campbell & Gregor 2002; Golding 2002). The idea, as we adapted it, is for the person to put himself/herself, as someone who has some involvement in equity, at the centre of a sheet of plain paper. Then think of all the other players who may have a role in supporting or sustaining the practices or strategies being considered. The strength of those linkages can be indicated by double, single, or dashed lines; crossed lines indicate a non-existent or blocked link; double-headed arrows indicate competition.

Metaphor elicitation: metaphors help people to bring unconscious thoughts and feelings to a level of awareness where they can be discussed and explored. This is important, given that, by some estimates, 95% of all cognition occurs in the shadows of our mind, while only 5% occurs in higher-order consciousness. Talking indirectly about issues; for example, a TAFE institute as a garden opens up sensitive issues in a way that is less confronting and more imaginative than direct interrogation (Zaltman 2003).

Everyone with whom we broached the possibility of an evocative task responded enthusiastically. The attrition rate, however, was high. Writing is time-consuming and presented a real hurdle. People who received write-ups of their initial conversations with questions preferred to go through them in person (and did). So, too, with recording journeys—the task excited people, but only one wrote up the experience in detail, the others wanted to talk it through. The ecosystem task elicited a sketchy outline from one person. A long conversation with her fleshed it out and together we took the ecosystem picture to another staff member and developed it further, then to the institute director where we explored more of its interesting subtleties.

The relationship-mapping task was handled in a particularly interesting way at the site that focused on it. The research associate convened a ‘conversation club’ and invited three people from three equity areas to spend a morning together mapping their linkages into the community. One of the project team members went along to observe and to probe. It was a highly successful venture and led several of the participants to announce that they could see new opportunities for themselves as a result of the discussions.

In retrospect, evocative tasks like these work best as a stimulus for conversation. People need to think about them ahead of time, but carrying out the task is something best done in a group or interview situation—in conversation—not at a word processor. There is a second lesson from this

experience. The purpose of the innovative tools and evocative tasks was to get around the problem of the one-off interview. The nature of our methodology, however, meant that interviews with many people were not one-offs. We met with some key informants on three or more occasions over a period of several months. These were serious (if enjoyable) discussions which allowed us to revisit ideas, check interpretations and clarify impressions.

To summarise: the tool that worked best was the ongoing engagement with key individuals both inside and outside the TAFE institutes. The return visits, going over old ground until we were sure we had a reasonably accurate picture, demonstrated our good faith and encouraged them to be thoughtful and honest in return. It might sound odd to call this approach a tool, but the ongoing engagement served exactly to help, as we stated, 'to gauge the culture of the organisation'.

Findings: Institute ecologies

Introduction and overview

The TAFE institute ecosystems we set out to study consisted of three elements: the equity initiative introduced; the internal process and structures of the institute; and equity stakeholders in the larger community. This chapter looks at the research findings for the three components, their relationship to one another and, in the case of the TAFE institute, relationships within the organisation.

The equity initiatives

The study began by identifying innovative practices (initiatives) which met the needs of particular equity groups. The intent was to track the way these initiatives permeated the TAFE institute in which they were introduced. The principal initiatives are described in table 2.

Table 2 Thumbnail sketches of initiatives introduced into the TAFE institutes

| | Initiative | Time frame | Sponsor |
|---|---|--|--|
| 1 | <p>A year-long project-based learning program for youth (aged 16–24) who had not completed school and were not employed; aimed at certificate II level</p> <p>The initiative was one of six funded through a highly publicised statewide program. The funds paid for student contact hours, extra teaching staff, student excursions and materials, and coordination (support). In addition to the project-based vocational learning, pre-vocational tutoring in literacy and numeracy were given. The program we studied was extremely successful in terms of student engagement through an innovative group project.</p> <p>The program was repeated a second year at the same sites. Funding will be available for a third round in 2006 but the funds will go directly to the TAFE institutes; the statewide coordination and support role discontinued.</p> | <p>Initially 12 months, 2004</p> <p>repeated 2005</p> <p>renewed for 2006 but without overall coordination</p> | <p>State government</p> |
| 2 | <p>A partnership initiated by a community business to provide hospitality training (certificates I and II) for its employees, all of whom have some disability</p> <p>The partners both contribute resources; for example, the TAFE provides contact hours within its profile allocation; the enterprise provides an aide for the students while at TAFE. It also provides work placements for other TAFE students who have a disability. The opportunity to study in the TAFE environment has encouraged many of the trainees to expand their horizons.</p> <p>The business itself is extremely successful and has attracted national media attention. It is working to replicate its model by offering to mentor and support other groups interested in setting up businesses that employ and train people with disabilities. It advises such groups to work with their local TAFE institute.</p> | <p>Started in 1996, continuing</p> | <p>A local business established to train and employ people with a disability</p> |

| | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| 3 | <p>A two-year program to prevent Indigenous school students' suicide and self-harm by assisting them to build their knowledge and pride in their Aboriginality and develop positive links into community</p> <p>The idea originated with staff at the TAFE institute who approached a number of potential funding agencies. Eventually the Department of Health and Ageing agreed to fund it for two years and then to repeat the funding for a second but final time. Resources paid for a project officer, week-long camps (the core of the project) and coordinating mentors for each young person.</p> <p>The program has been extremely successful. A group of the boys, for example, have formed a dance troupe which performs at an increasing number of venues. While the entire program has been well thought through, it owes much of its success to the talents of the individuals involved in its conception and implementation.</p> | <p>Initially 2 years 2003 repeated 2005 funding being sought elsewhere for 2006</p> | <p>Devised by a few individuals at the TAFE; funding provided on request by local division of state agency</p> |
| 4 | <p>Facilitation to enable a group of lecturers in adult basic education to learn as a team how to effectively work with an influx of 15 to 17-year-old young people who disliked school, had a history of educational failure, and exhibited challenging behaviours. The students were aiming to complete the equivalent of Year 10.</p> <p>In 2001 the staff decided to build upon their team skills and use a problem-solving approach to explore the full spectrum of solutions for working with this new student group. They held daily team meetings; relevant institute support staff were invited to join the discussions, while prototype solutions were developed. In 2002 they sought and received funding from ANTA which allowed them to adjust student-teacher ratios as well as set up and resource a home room on campus.</p> <p>The teaching team's ability to work with these students continues to grow, although meetings are less frequent now. The number of students in the program has gradually expanded from the original 15 to 35.</p> | <p>Funded in 2001 and 2002 key practices continue without additional funds</p> | <p>The idea of the TAFE unit coordinator, funding provided initially by the institute then by ANTA's youth at-risk funds</p> |
| 5 | <p>A vocational pathway developed jointly between a mining company and a TAFE campus for local Indigenous people to prepare them for employment in the mining industry and, in one program, to further the skills of those already employed</p> <p>This particular initiative follows on from a number of partnerships between mining companies in the region and schools, as well as several other campuses of the institute. The funding provided by the company pays for student places. There is close liaison between the company and the teachers for all aspects of the program and the students' wellbeing.</p> <p>Both the TAFE and the companies have developed close relationships with the local Indigenous community. Without unequivocal support from the community, attendance and engagement would evaporate, as happened temporarily when the TAFE institute was restructured and the community thought it had lost its voice in education and training.</p> | <p>Funded in 2005 and continuing</p> | <p>Mining company working in the region</p> |
| 6 | <p>A multicultural education program focused largely on English language teaching but also provides support for the relatively few migrants and refugees who continue into vocational programs</p> <p>This language program started with five students, through the persistence of one outsider. It has expanded over the years so that it now attracts more than \$1 million annually in service contracts to teach migrants and refugees (and the former 'outsider' manages an institute centre).</p> <p>The teaching staff feel somewhat constrained by the contracts which tightly specify the nature of provision; however, a new contract to oversee the entire resettlement program for a group of refugees opens up possibilities for a broader engagement with the refugee group.</p> | <p>Began in early 1990s, continuing</p> | <p>Government contracts as well as some profile funding</p> |
| 7 | <p>A pathways program for disengaged young people conducted at the welfare agency's premises with a dedicated position from the TAFE institute. The program leads to a recognised Year 12 qualification.</p> <p>The program is resourced jointly by the welfare agency and TAFE in part from their own reserves and in part from government funds for which they jointly apply. The total package of resources enables a small group of young people to work in an informal environment with a teacher and support staff who look after students' other issues such as homelessness, health problems, career counselling and so on. All this is seamlessly integrated.</p> <p>The program's flexibility means that, although students are nominally enrolled only for 12 months, where it is warranted, they can participate for 18 months.</p> | <p>since 1998 requires annual application for external funds</p> | <p>Non-government welfare agency</p> |

| | | | |
|----|---|--|---|
| 8 | <p>A pilot within a large national program aimed at engaging long-term unemployed people. The program led to Certificate I in Preparatory Education, Certificate II in Retail and Hospitality, and Certificate I in Meat Studies</p> <p>The 49 participants came from a broad range of ages and equity groups. Altogether 15 TAFE staff were involved in the program, with a project manager who kept in close contact with the participants. A key aim of the initiative was to develop personal resilience among the participants, as well as shifting their mindset from welfare dependency to sustainable employability and developing community networks.</p> <p>Formal external evaluation of the participants' personal development was commissioned by the project manager to assist future projects aimed at getting long-term unemployed into jobs. It was disappointing that the institute did not receive further funding to maintain the initiative.</p> | 12 months, 2003 | Commonwealth program |
| 9 | <p>An education and training program for prisoners at the state's maximum security prison</p> <p>The TAFE institute has invested significantly from its own resources to develop an effective teaching program, including building facilities at the prison that were more suited for teaching and training than existing facilities. It has also established a dedicated prison education department.</p> <p>There are a range of barriers to providing the level of education and training which the TAFE would like. These include the time available for training and the priority which the prison gives it (currently both are low), as well as the inevitable difficulty in maintaining a consistent program for prisoners who may be moved or released. There is a further concern that, with the privatisation of the state's other prisons, any broad understanding of the purpose and possibilities of prison education may be eroded.</p> | Since 1990, contract comes up for renewal every three years | Government contract |
| 10 | <p>Originally a pilot site for trialling and refining a new vocationally oriented Year 12 qualification, it is now part of the institute's profile funding.</p> <p>Institute profile funding for the course is actually less than the amount schools receive for teaching the same course, a problem exacerbated by the fact that the students enrolled at the TAFE institute tend to come with a complex set of learning disadvantages. As a consequence, the TAFE unit sources funds from a variety of agencies and programs to provide the broader support and flexibility (in staff/student ratio and time available) required by the young people enrolled.</p> <p>The course is taught by a dedicated staff group who have established effective guidelines for working with these students and for providing the support the staff themselves need in this demanding and often draining work.</p> | Pilot funding 2001 continues as profile with additional support from other funded programs | State government reform of post-compulsory education and training |

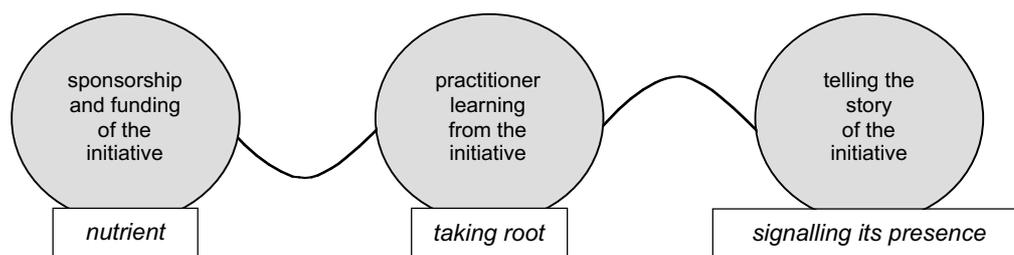
Note: ANTA = Australian National Training Authority¹

The ten initiatives differed substantially from one another but turned out to have two characteristics in common, the first being that the target student group in all but one case was homogeneous: the initiative focused on a single equity client group, although group members often spanned more than one area of disadvantage. The second was that most of the initiatives catered for only a small group of learners at a time (fewer than 15) and involved some form of individual support, most often mentoring or case management.

The longevity of the initiatives was analysed to see if there were factors which influenced the willingness or ability of an institute to adapt to the initiative. Three such factors emerged: the origin or impetus for the initiative—its sponsorship and funding; practitioner learning from the initiative; and how the program was evaluated and reported (telling its story). It could be claimed that these three factors enable an initiative to make a start at building an ecological niche in the TAFE institute. Figure 1 illustrates the components; it is followed by a description of each component.

¹ Abolished in 2005; its functions were taken over by the Department of Education, Science and Training.

Figure 1 An ecological view of practitioner initiatives: Principal features



Sponsorship and funding of the initiative

The ‘nutrient’ which allowed each initiative to germinate, as it were, consists of the resources applied and the expectations held by its sponsors. A pattern emerged from the data which clearly distinguished initiatives which had been funded by government with the purpose of fostering innovation from those sponsored by agencies external to VET seeking services for particular equity groups.

Initiatives sponsored by government to foster innovation

These were generally funded for 12 months or less, since the funding is meant simply to ‘seed’ the innovation. This strictly limited timeframe is a deliberate policy and, in the words of one senior bureaucrat, ‘it is a deliberate and useful policy, designed to see if things can be done better—to raise expectations’.

The problem with this model is that more than expectations need to be raised. In most cases, funds also need to be raised if the new practice is to continue. The resources required to sustain a practice are similar in scale to the resources required to trial the practice in the first place. In the cases examined here, the additional resources were most commonly used to:

- ✧ significantly increase the teacher-to-student ratios
- ✧ employ additional specialist staff such as case managers, counsellors, mentors, welfare advisers
- ✧ purchase materials, pay for camps, rent off-site venues.

The funds required are substantial. One state initiative funded trials at six TAFE sites; each received about \$150 000 for a one-year program which translated roughly into an expenditure of \$10 000 for each student. (These school students were not part of the profile funding of the institutes.) This compares with the average recurrent cost per equivalent full-time student in government secondary schools of \$8000 in 2000–01 (McArthur 2003, p.12). Yet even with this higher level of funding, the site which was widely thought to be the most successful required further funds which it found within its local community.

Practitioners and other institute staff often spend considerable time and effort trying to garner enough resources to continue with good equity initiatives. ‘Shandy funding’ is the rather evocative description applied to the result. It is, as implied, the garnering of funds from many different sources—reaching into whatever buckets of money might be available and (more or less) relevant—and pulling them together to provide the best service for the learners. One relatively small equity unit runs seven budgets to keep the funding properly tracked. The unit was not complaining about managing seven budgets; the point was to illustrate the meaning of shandy funding. There is, however, a general feeling of frustration, of wasted energy in scrambling after bits of money to continue with initiatives that have demonstrated their promise.

Initiatives sponsored by external agencies to support an equity group

These were among the most long-lived and all are continuing. If the three examples in this group are typical, and we have no reason to think otherwise, outsiders who approach TAFE institutes

expect the innovation to be in place for the long term. To say it is an *imperative* for them is not too strong a word. The mining companies are a good example: they need to ensure local Aboriginal people engage in training ‘because we are going to be mining here for another 40 years and they are our future workforce—they are also our stakeholders’. A determination to ‘do what it takes’ to improve things for the particular equity group characterised all three initiatives.

The three share another characteristic. They are all hands-on working partnerships where the ‘outsider’ not only instigated the collaboration but continues to contribute energy and experience to it through ongoing cycles of continuous improvement. The fact that roughly one-third of the initiatives fell into this outsider-instigated hands-on funding model was unanticipated. It may reflect a trend identified by some towards joint venture partnerships, where the boundary between innovative training and imaginatively meeting the broader needs of the equity group are shared and blurred.

It is worth pointing out that three of the initiatives in table 2 were instigated by TAFE practitioners who then found funding from inside or outside their institute. These exhibit the same determination to ‘do what it takes’ to get a new practice up and running as the outsiders’ initiatives had. It is apparent that an energy is created from having an original idea and the passion to see it implemented is universal. In this case TAFE practitioners are equally as determined as outsiders to move forward.

Practitioner learning from the initiative

It may sound a little obvious, but one of the characteristics of the equity initiatives examined is that the practitioners involved learned a great deal about working with their equity groups. This learning is briefly sketched here because it constitutes the ‘bottom up’ knowledge. This is the knowledge it is hoped will permeate TAFE institutes and merge with top-down strategies.

The most fundamental learning is that VET clients who are not able, at the outset, to engage productively with a vocational course need a strong bridge to take them to the point where they can engage. Each student requires his/her own bridge, since its construction depends on their individual ambitions and the nature of disadvantage they suffer. Bridge construction is necessarily a joint undertaking² and, like any joint undertaking, sound and trusting relationships amongst the parties involved are mandatory. Relationships are the currency of the equity realm.

Three specific ‘learnings’ about building productive relationships with equity clients came through the initiatives examined.

- ✧ It takes time and real flexibility: students will not necessarily make steady progress. There is an ‘induction’ phase (sometimes a very long one) where there is very little forward movement. Often enough, too, complexities in their lives mean that students may wander off course altogether for a period.
- ✧ Teachers need the moral support and understanding of colleagues. The risk of burn-out is higher where practitioners feel their colleagues are critical of their methods or of the very fact they have brought these disadvantaged clients into the shared workspace.
- ✧ It takes the ‘right kind’ of person—a skilful teacher who is genuinely respectful of the clients, who believes the clients are fully capable of learning and achieving *and* who has reserves of strength and stamina. Our informants were quick to point out that simply wanting to ‘do good’ is not only insufficient, it can be counter-productive.

Given this agreed foundation, one must ask: what does it matter *in terms of learning how to do it better* that initiatives are only funded for a short period? If these fundamentals are so clear, why does everyone urge that initiatives be genuinely piloted and trialled over two, three, more cycles? The answer is clear:

² A wonderful teacher described his work with students as ‘building bridges while crossing them’.

building real bridges (not the abstract knowledge that a bridge needs to be built) is not easy. It is learned through experience, through working with particular students in particular courses.

Practitioners we met who were able to continue experimenting with an initiative consistently said things like ‘[after three years] we’re getting better and better at supporting them, seeing them through’, and this from a group of practitioners who were experienced to begin with. After four years, one institute team still meets for two hours each week to share experiences and jointly come up with ideas for working with particular learners. It is no accident that the most successful initiatives all involved teams of practitioners working collegially: learning from one another; asking one another: why did you do that? why did I do that?

Telling the story of the initiative

The practitioners involved in their respective initiatives ensured that some of their working time was spent in reflection. They discussed what they were doing, what was working, what was not, and why. They were honest with themselves and learned a great deal from the process.

They all also wrote formal reports about the initiative. Funding agencies require this, as do the institutes. In several cases, additional reports were written in an effort to gain further funding or to apply for an award. These reports tend to show things in the best possible light, which is entirely understandable, but it generates a trail of good news and a falling-away of nuance and complexity until, if it reaches the minister’s office, it is only the best news that survives and somewhat coloured at that. The drive to make public only the good news and to mask any inadequacies in an initiative was best explained by a senior manager we talked to:

It’s the culture of politics. We have become part of a culture of making things look better than they are. Politics in that sense—making things always look good—even undermines potentially great government policies. It makes us all less honest.

Initiatives begin to look as if all the elements of the process are under control and have been resolved, when in reality many aspects were not adequately resolved. Not only does this result in premature closure, it destroys the grounds for discriminating amongst initiatives. If everything looks good, how does one decide which to back? Yet distinctions have to be made; resources are finite.

Impact of the initiatives

The influence of the initiatives on practice and policy within their institutes was subtle, at best, and took some effort to detect. Examples of influence include:

- ✧ *Expansion of service:* the provision of services to an equity group was increased. In three cases this was effected through a change in profile funding; in the fourth, the external partner expanded its effort to recruit students and then purchased the additional training.
- ✧ *Advice from colleagues:* practitioners from other faculties/departments working with the same or similar equity clients ask for advice and help from practitioners who had been involved in initiatives. This appears to happen routinely and to good effect in some institutes and very little in others.
- ✧ *Personal change of direction:* a few practitioners who had not formerly worked with the particular client group discovered both a talent and a commitment to the group and have changed professional course to continue working with them.
- ✧ *Policy adjustment:* where significant numbers of disengaged youth came into an institute through an initiative, their disruptive behaviour triggered a reconsideration and adjustment of discipline policy and orientation procedures which benefited other students too.
- ✧ *Effective PR:* some of the particularly high-profile initiatives (that is, the two or three that have attracted considerable media attention and the few others which were singled out internally) do help enhance the stature of equity provision within the institute and community.

It is worth remembering that one important and lasting influence of initiatives is the growth and achievement of the students involved and often, as a result, the benefits to their families and the local community more broadly. We heard a number of examples from the recipients themselves, but perhaps the most interesting story was the program designed to minimise suicide and self-harm amongst Indigenous youth. The officer who led this extremely successful initiative was asked whether termination of funding would mean that other young people who might also need this help to strengthen their cultural identity and connection with community would miss out. The answer was immediate and pointed:

No, they won't miss out because a core of boys who have participated in this program will carry on the work. They will see young Aboriginal kids who are struggling and will feel obliged to help them, the same as they were helped.

And he could point to substantial evidence that this was already happening.

Linkages and relationships within TAFE institutes

The nature of the relationships and processes operating within TAFE institutes may account for some instances of the relatively low impact of the equity initiatives—far lower than the ‘funding to seed innovation’ rationale would predict or find optimal.³ We distinguish here between the lateral influence of initiatives on practitioner colleagues and ‘upwards’ influence on institute management. While sideways and upwards is not usually a sensible distinction to make in organisational theory, in our particular case the findings concerning the two highlight such different issues that, in the interests of clarity, we have separated them.

Lateral linkages

In all the initiatives we studied, the practitioners directly involved learned more about working with the particular equity groups. One might expect this knowledge to be useful to other practitioners. In a few of the institutes there was some lateral spread to colleagues in the original or other faculties, but there was little indication that the transfer had developed real momentum. Three types of disconnection between the arena where the equity initiatives were introduced and the rest of the institute were highlighted to account for the limited spread of practitioner learning. The three are:

- ✧ *Structural disconnect*: in five of the six fieldwork institutes the practitioners involved in equity initiatives worked in a faculty or on a campus that specialised in working with particular equity groups and providing general education (as distinct from vocational training) to them. This specialisation separates them from colleagues and can impose a barrier to lateral influence.
- ✧ *Cultural disconnect*: there is a perception amongst practitioners that the philosophical and pedagogical base of education intended to reverse disadvantage is somehow different from—and alien and opposite to—the thinking that underpins vocational programs intended to enable employment. The divide was painfully visible in one of the equity initiatives studied: a program that required teachers from both sides of ‘the divide’ to work together to help a group of disengaged young people. The person charged with facilitating this arrangement had a tough job:

The two sides had these stereotypes: the voc prep people were assumed to be ‘soft’, endlessly forgiving, interested only in pastoral care; the industry skills teachers were thought of as ‘tough’ and wholly insensitive to the kids’ individual needs. Getting them together was a long process of mediation. We set group norms of how we would communicate, when we would

³ There *are* examples outside this study where a single equity initiative seems to have had major impact; for example, the ‘Building Bridges’ pre-vocational program at Wodonga Institute of TAFE (ANTA 2005, case study p.86); the ‘Riding the Rapids’ project also at Wodonga. Closer examination, however, shows that both were actually developed through a succession of stages. The original short-term funded initiative was only one step in a series of funding opportunities which led eventually to the development of the materials now being widely used. None of the initiatives we studied took the route of developing new products; they remained focused on day-to-day practice and enhanced student support.

meet. We clarified roles and tried to show the two had complementary skills and the students needed both. It worked a little, but didn't ever develop to the extent of cooperatively working with students that I would have liked, and that there should have been.

- ✧ *Educational (pathway) disconnect*: this is the gap between the outcomes of pre-vocational study and the demands of vocational programs. There is a perception that the first rung in training packages is often higher than the level of achievement attained in equity programs. Others pointed to a gap between certificate II and certificate III in some training packages. One strategy in place at two institutes and being introduced in a limited way at a third is to encourage the vocational program areas to deliver certificates I and II in partnership with specialist 'equity' support.

The following section identifies practices that help to overcome the effects of these disconnects by considering synergies within TAFE institutes as a whole.

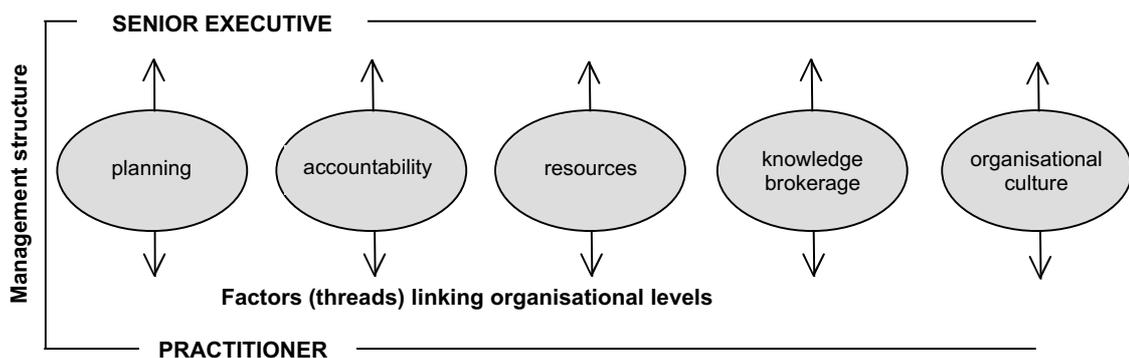
Linkages between 'bottom' and 'top' in TAFE institutes

The linkages which we found to be germane to *merging* the equity knowledge, intentions and practice of practitioners (the 'bottom') with the equity knowledge, intentions and strategies of senior management (the 'top') are located in factors which are common to staff at every level of a TAFE institute. We identified five such factors, although there is some overlap amongst them:

- ✧ planning
- ✧ accountability
- ✧ budgets and resources
- ✧ knowledge brokerage
- ✧ organisational culture.

If the actions of staff at one level of the organisation align with and assist with the tasks at another level, for example, in planning or resource allocation—in each of these five areas—then equity practice and equity strategy can be said to be merged. The linkages are sketched in figure 2.

Figure 2 Factors which connect 'top' and 'bottom' in TAFE institutes



We turn now to findings about how these five factors operate to merge, or potentially to merge, equity practice and strategy.

Planning

TAFE institutes, like most large organisations, require each organisational unit to submit an operational/business plan. Typically there is a cascade of plans, starting with an overarching institute strategy, which might state as a broad equity objective: 'providing a learning environment where the culture, experience and diversity of clients are recognised and respected'. A faculty will define outcomes it could deliver to meet the broad objective. Teaching departments in turn decide

which of these actions would deliver the stated outcomes. This may sound more ‘top down’ than it is. Practitioners often contribute to the overarching strategy. Furthermore, institute strategies allow freedom for invention and fresh thinking at the faculty and practitioner level.

We observed one process that specifically used the cascade of strategic and operational plans to stimulate and support practitioner initiatives. It was focused on enhancing flexible delivery, but the process is equally applicable to fostering equity initiatives. It is the process of the Educational Resources Support Team at TAFE NSW Hunter Institute and is described in the box below.

The Educational Resources Support Team at Hunter Institute

Instead of the conventional approach of calling directly for innovative proposals from practitioners, the Educational Resources Support Team combs through the annual service delivery plan (operational plan) of each faculty, highlighting which strategic directions, educational initiatives and projected changes in delivery or curriculum would enhance flexibility.

The team comprises the institute’s corporate managers (e.g., Finance, Learning Environment, Educational Development, Information Technology Services). All facets of the institute which might need to be involved in an initiative can look at it together and resolve any issues. It also means practitioners effectively have a one-stop shop for approval of their plans.

Deciding which potential initiatives to support is a two-stage process. The team first reviews the operational plan. If initiatives described there are given the green light, the proponents are asked to write a full business plan. If the initial proposal has promise but needs to be further developed, an officer from the Educational Development Unit will work with the proponents to refine the ideas. This year several proposals went back to faculties for further development, were resubmitted and received formal support at the next Educational Resources Support Team meeting.

Support can mean outright funding (the team has available from its own institute budget some \$150 000) or help in accessing external funding. The Educational Resources Support Team has found initiatives from two or more faculties that could be combined. The team maintains a database, a ‘matrix of opportunity’, for good ideas in business plans that are yet to be funded by the Educational Resources Support Team or an external source.

It is an interesting process in that it is extremely formal and strategic, yet has the effect of informally helping practitioners to achieve their ends. The whole is quite dynamic: ‘messages’ and plans flow back and forth between the Educational Resources Support Team and practitioners.

The fulcrum on which the process depends is that practitioners’ good ideas are fed into their faculty’s service delivery plan. It has taken time and effort by the Educational Resources Support Team to ensure this first essential step works correctly. In the past, practitioners applied directly for institute funding for new projects. This tying of practitioner proposals directly to institute strategy and planning documents is quite a significant cultural shift.

It is important to note that a process like Educational Resources Support Team doesn’t necessarily work perfectly from the start. It requires patience and an investment mindset: improving gradually, iteration after iteration.

An innovation management system with the same overall intent as the Educational Resources Support Team is being planned at another TAFE institute. The intention is that whenever people get an idea—‘from something small to revolutionary’—they submit it and it will be actively considered against criteria in the strategic plan. It may be seeded for a few thousand dollars. It may be assigned a mentor—the idea being ‘half-baked ideas need a baker’. It may be parked in an ‘ideas bay’ where it will be periodically re-evaluated. Final proposals will go to the senior management team. So, like the Educational Resources Support Team, the mechanism is designed to encourage practitioners’ initiatives but, equally, to ensure they are connected to ‘the top’.

Accountability

Every one of the people we spoke to believes they should be accountable for what they do, for the outcomes they deliver and the rectitude with which they spend scarce resources. Every one of

them, at every level in the institutes, also harbours significant disquiet about the constraints current accountability regimes impose on them. The unease is three-fold.

- ✧ Outcome measures, which may be appropriate for vocational courses, for example, module completions, qualifications attained, employment outcomes, misjudge the fundamental purpose of equity programs, which is to ensure that clients are *able* to complete modules, achieve qualifications and gain employment.
- ✧ The stories people really want to tell about their work—what they do, why they do it, what works here but not there, what felt like a breakthrough, what was funny, what wasn't—have no outlet. Yet that lived experience is what really informs their next act. It is what they take into account as they go to work each day: director and practitioner alike.
- ✧ People at different levels of the institute are subject to different accountability regimes: their key performance indicators differ and, as one insightful informant said, sketching lily pads on a serviette to illustrate her point, 'what is meaningful in one part of the pond gets left behind in the leap across to the next set of key performance indicators and then again to the next management pad, and on up the system'.

These are critically important concerns that do need to be addressed, both within individual TAFE institutes and within the larger VET system that imposes the accountability requirements. One possibility is the development of a hierarchy of measurable outcomes which more fully describes the steps that move disadvantaged learners to the point where they can productively engage with vocational programs and on to completions, qualifications and employment *if* these are in their best interests. A model for doing this is proposed in the final chapter.

Resources

This sentence was first drafted to read: 'each level of the organisation has funds to spend'. But it is probably more accurate to say, 'each level of the organisation has less funding than it would like and the tie that binds is the reality of tight budgets and scarce resources'. Without wanting to over-generalise, top and bottom tend to hold unflattering stereotypes of one another when it comes to institute resources for addressing equity.

Senior management sees equity practitioners as insatiable in their appetite for resources. The view is not unjustified. Equity practitioners describe themselves, with pride, as tenacious fighters whose job *is* to advocate relentlessly for their client group. They often see their TAFE course not as the students' second chance but as their last chance, which is what fuels their passionate determination that it not be lost. As one director said:

There is always a tension between social inclusion and the skills needed by industry. For example, just how much can be expended to get the last two struggling students through? Part of my job is balancing the tensions between being fair as an institution and being efficient. That's how I'll be judged.

The value of short-term equity initiatives is exactly that they put greater resources into the hands of practitioners than is normally available for those same learners. An example illustrating this perfectly was a special initiative for students with an intellectual disability which allowed them to study horticulture at Canberra Institute of Technology (ANTA 2005, p.45). It was extremely successful in terms of the students' eventual employment outcomes and continuation in training, but it took them two years to achieve certificate I. Profile funding allocates a single semester for a Certificate I in Horticulture.

The basic funding dilemma is not one we can solve but, in terms of drawing bottom and top closer, we will suggest that practitioners learn to frame their petition for institute resources as a full business case (see next chapter). In fact, when we asked practitioners how our research might assist them, the answer often was: help us to make a convincing case for resources.

Knowledge brokerage

Our fieldwork indicates that the device most commonly used to connect top and bottom in a TAFE institute are managers who like to interact with a broad range of people and who see their role as promoting such interactions. There are any number of descriptors for this role including ‘boundary-crosser’, ‘mediator’ or simply ‘influencer’. In ecological terms, this manager is a pollinator—a butterfly who comfortably alights here and there. Malcolm Gladwell in *The tipping point* talks about individuals who act as ‘infectious agents’ spreading ideas. The role is to listen, to share, to stimulate people’s imaginations and refresh their interest in innovation. It was fascinating how often informants reminisced about particular individuals, some long gone from the scene, who did exactly that, and how valuable it was, and how memorable.

Some organisations are moving beyond *an individual* brokering of knowledge in this way. The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, for example, is developing a strong theoretical and evidence-based foundation for encouraging *groups* to meet regularly for sustained conversation and even action research (see, for example, its *Brokering Digest*; also Hindle 2006). The people we spoke to in TAFE institutes expressed a real interest in mechanisms that would enable them to spend more time sharing ideas and experiences with colleagues across the organisation.

Sustainable and productive conversations can be triggered in a number of ways, including evocative tasks and commissioned think pieces. An interview probe we used to good effect was to ask: ‘if your TAFE institute were an ecosystem, what would it be?’ The answers ranged widely:

It’s a forest because it can be beautiful but it is also scary, even dangerous. You see the big things but there are important little things that would be visible if you stopped to look. There are also things that purposely hide.

It’s like a rough ocean now. I’d like to be surfing—I’ve always seen my role as getting people onto surfboards so they can experience the thrill for themselves. It’s been like that in the past. But the waves are too dangerous just at the moment. Instead, for the time being, we’ve found a dappled rock pool to take refuge in.

To me it’s a belly dancer. It’s about movement and it is fluid. It shifts direction but there is the excitement of the music and the coherence of being a single organism.

Interestingly, the last two are from the same institute and from managers at roughly the same level.

Perhaps the best example of the way metaphors can serve to stimulate knowledge brokerage and open up fresh thinking was the metaphor that was suggested most often: the metaphor of the institute as a vegetable garden. It generated a great play of ideas and, unwittingly, reinforced the aptness of ecology as a way of thinking about TAFE institutes and equity initiatives.

Institute as veggie garden

It seemed immediate and natural for people to think of the learners who come to VET as seeds and seedlings. The notion tends to trigger a cascade of statements about plants having very different requirements. 'Some are high maintenance in the beginning, but once given a good start are okay.' 'Some need a really sheltered environment out of the wind and protected from pests and weeds forever.' 'The best time for planting differs.' 'Plants grow at different rates and there are really subtle variations even amongst carrots.'

Inevitably, VET practitioners were the gardeners who tended the plants. They were expected to produce the crops, be knowledgeable about the seedlings and attentive to their development. It was also expected that they would be equipped with the right tools to do the job. And with the right fertiliser.

Fertiliser cropped up (pun not intended) a lot. Interestingly, the fertiliser often emphasised was the local community. There are several examples in this study of particularly effective relationships between local councils and businesses and the TAFE institute. These prompted the horticultural expert on our research team (Dave Meyers) to take the ecological metaphor to a different plane, but one worth describing if the metaphor is to be applied more rigorously:

Highly interdependent mutualistic associations between soil fungi and plant roots—technically mycorrhizas (also referred to as symbiosis)—are ecological exemplars. The host plant receives mineral nutrients from the relationship while the fungus receives photosynthetically derived carbon compounds. As well, there is a third player in the equation: beside the plant and the fungus, there are soil factors.

The state of the garden was a concern to people. One garden, because it was new, was described as immature and fragile. What would it look like when it was mature? The answer: 'the relationships (vegetative, human and environmental) would be robust and each species could rely on all the other elements in the ecosystem to play their role well—to trust the ecology'. At the same time people understood that ecologies are, rightly, dynamic, and roles could change as species and elements mutate and evolve.

The climate is a factor. Generally thought to be generated by government, some detected a warmer equity breeze blowing after an arctic phase, while others were still not sure which way the winds were blowing. There were quips about pests and weedicides.

Then, just as the ecological picture was settling in, the Gardening Sub-committee put in an appearance. It is there, we were assured, to ensure fairness: 'the turnips have to give room to the peas'. It is there to decide whether there are enough gardeners. It is there to ensure the right mix of veggies is produced—and perhaps some flowers—to meet the needs of the people who harvest them. It seemed to have growing roles.

And there were the riddles. One will suffice. Why is a garden like a story?⁴

The point is not that using an ecological metaphor to explore a TAFE institute is amusing, although it can be. The point is that the ecological metaphor is doing what metaphors are supposed to do. They open up a way of seeing things that is both fresh and revealing. They allow us to voice thoughts that are tentative, that don't have to be right. They allow us to hold contradictory views at the same time (see Zaltman 2003). Lakoff (2004) attributes their strength to their capacity to effortlessly reframe situations. There is one caveat to the use of metaphors. They can be misleading if taken too far. It is always sensible and often instructive to ask: Where does the metaphor fall down?

There is a problem in finding time for such pursuits. The pressure on staff at every level forces them to deal with the immediate—and there is always an immediate—which pushes sustained conversation to the margins. Or it *can* push sustained conversation to the margins. It was noticeable that the groups of practitioners we spoke to who were known for the excellence of their equity initiatives invariably made time to talk amongst themselves frankly and continually. We return to this issue later in the report.

Organisational culture

Organisational culture is a large topic. All we want to do here is remind readers how critical it is to merging the talents of staff at bottom and top (and middle). In discussing the lateral impact of the equity initiatives we noted the existence of 'silos' in some institutes that effectively blocked the spread of new practices and fresh thinking even amongst equity practitioners. In other TAFE institutes interactions between the equity faculty and vocational disciplines were frequent and

⁴ Both have plots.

instigated by both ‘sides’. The difference between silos and collaboration is a difference in organisation culture built from the way past events are channelled and remembered. The following is the way one manager described the historical development of a particularly collaborative institute:

Over the last 20 years we had wave after wave of special groups come to us. The diversity was a real challenge. Most of the staff were used to traditional apprentices—diversity was not on their horizon. There were serious complaints from the new groups, some leading to Equal Opportunity court cases with significant legal costs.

You could say the complaints provided us with the ‘opportunity’ to look at the issues. The Director insisted everyone take part in anti-discrimination workshops. The message at the workshops, which continue, is: we are not here to tell you what to believe but you need to understand the cost to you and the organisation if you do not do the right thing.

All staff know they have to get it right and they ask for advice on how to approach students from diverse backgrounds. Departments are now taking on board students they previously would have sent away.

Institute directors are pivotal in setting organisational culture. Risk aversion on the part of senior management has a stifling effect on the emergence of imaginative equity initiatives. Encouraging bold practice has the reverse effect. Practitioners in one institute said they felt ‘empowered’ to go out into the community to provide service and support for disadvantaged groups *because* of the director’s well-known commitment to equity—made clear by providing institute funds to restore and furnish an old building as an Indigenous learning centre that belongs to the local community, not to the TAFE.

A critical aspect of organisational culture is whether practitioners are encouraged to have a strong voice within the institute. One TAFE institute has expended immense effort over many years to help work groups operate as coherent teams, including ongoing facilitation when fractures occur. This, too, engenders a culture where practitioner groups feel strong enough to be bold and innovative when it comes to broadening and deepening equity provision. The Youth Unit at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE is a good example of the strength a group of practitioners can acquire through capitalising on their own experience, some of which came from participating in a succession of funded equity initiatives.

Youth Unit at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE

The Faculty of Further Education at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE has a long history of working with youth and of attracting funds for its work with equity groups, as the following examples demonstrate.

- ✧ What became its highly regarded Young Adult Migrant Education Course began with funding from the Victorian Health Department in the early 1990s to help young refugees and asylum seekers.
- ✧ The faculty has been in partnership with the Salvation Army to provide education and broad support for disengaged youth for seven years.

Their Adult Literacy and Basic Education program had always been open to unemployed youth and early school leavers, but when the number of young people coming into the faculty began to increase markedly in the late 1990s, having them in the same classes as adults created difficulties. Other institutes have found something similar: a few young people in a class of adults works well for all, but once the age balance tips, problems emerge.

Staff began to think that a more dedicated client group approach would help, and in 2001 the Youth Unit was formed to bring the experience and expertise acquired together. The following year it was selected to be a pilot site for the new Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning with special funds attached. Its provision of this certificate continues and is expanding, with requests for places increasing from agencies working with 'at risk' youth.

The unit has established a strong reputation for working effectively with disadvantaged youth. In addition, and perhaps not unrelatedly, it has developed a clear understanding of the most effective way to staff the unit. They have found, for example, that it is best to have staff spend no more than 0.6 of a full-time load working with difficult youth. (The remainder is spent with other students.) Potential new staff are invited to try working in the unit for a few weeks to make sure this is really work they want to do and are suited to. Staff support for one another is exemplary, with a special emphasis on ensuring that each is reminded that they *are* helping their clients, even when progress seems elusive.

In 2003 the unit decided to take stock of what they had been learning through the various funded teaching opportunities and established the Practical Lessons Project. This project took an action research approach to reviewing processes and strategies in the unit. Student interviews were part of the process. After one term changes were made to staffing and a youth development officer appointed. Further adjustments were made over the next terms.

It is a nice example of how practitioners working within a coherent unit have been able to take an investment approach to their one-off opportunities. As a consequence, the unit has established a credible voice which allows it to advocate effectively for disenfranchised young people in a mainstream institution, and beyond.

How the five factors—planning, accountability, resources, knowledge brokerage and organisational culture—might be used to make institute ecologies more adaptive to practitioner initiatives and more capable of sustained equity improvement is discussed in the next chapter. Next we turn to the third component of the ecology: the local community.

Relationships with community and industry stakeholders

We met individuals at each TAFE institute who are remarkable in the effort they put into building links with local government, businesses and industry, schools, welfare agencies, Indigenous communities, and more. These people are constantly networking, joining committees, attending meetings, and identifying needs and opportunities in the community. Invariably they explain that useful relationships take a long time to build—years, not months—and that if they are superficial, they don't work.

There is a problem, however, in that these relationships tend to be personal. It is a problem that the 'networkers' themselves are well aware of and troubled by: what happens when they move on? The answer, in principle, lies in shifting the relationship away from what the management literature labels a person-to-person (P2P) relationship to a business-to-business (B2B) relationship. The transition requires articulating the reasons why the P2P is valuable and formalising that underpinning rationale in some way, perhaps through a memorandum of understanding.

The fact that three of the ten equity initiatives we studied were initiated by outsiders was not anticipated, but points to a new kind of relationship that seems to be emerging between equity

stakeholders in the community and TAFE institutes. It is new in the sense that the relationship is more dynamic and collaborative than the traditional model, where the division of labour is well defined: TAFE provides the training and the partner provides whatever its specialty is. Two such initiatives are described in the boxes below.

The relationship between Dial-a-Lunch and Gordon Institute

Dial-a-Lunch was established in 1991 to provide employment for four disabled people. The story begins with a mother, Marie Kuchenmeister, who found that the only employment options for her daughter on completing school were in sheltered workshops. Marie decided this was unacceptable and became determined to do something. The evolution of Dial-a-Lunch into a business that today operates two vibrant cafes and a successful catering business with a turnover of a million dollars, employing 45 young people with disabilities and a supervising staff of 20 is inspiring in itself. In fact, it shows what a single person can accomplish by gradually building a coalition of influential and committed community members. The story has received much media attention (including on the ABC's 7.30 Report).⁵

Training has been central to the Dial-a-Lunch story. Originally the organisation itself provided it on the job—Dial-a-Lunch was named a Training Provider of the Year during that phase. By 1996, however, the business had grown to a staff of 13 disabled young people and Marie approached Gordon Institute of TAFE to see if recognised training courses in generic and hospitality skills could be provided for Dial-a-Lunch staff.

From the start, the interaction between Dial-a-Lunch and Gordon has gone far beyond the simple delivery of targeted training to an enterprise. Gordon provides the requisite student contact hours from its profile funding and the business makes itself available for work placements for other Gordon Institute students with a disability.

What is especially interesting is how Dial-a-Lunch and Gordon have generated an increase in each other's capacity.

- ✧ One of the chefs from Gordon actually resigned to join Dial-a-Lunch.
- ✧ The learning resources designed by Gordon for Dial-a-Lunch students are being used by the company in a package it has put together to help others establish business ventures for people with special needs.
- ✧ Most of the hospitality staff at Gordon have enjoyed experimenting with new strategies and techniques, but about a quarter of the staff are uncomfortable working in Dial-a-Lunch's more innovative traineeship model and with students who can present difficulties. As a result the Gordon Institute is planning to access state innovation funds to assist these lecturers to be more adaptable (for all students).
- ✧ Dial-a-Lunch is becoming a registered training organisation to provide trainer training but not to provide student instruction.
- ✧ Because of the Dial-a-Lunch experience, Gordon Institute is revising its already-active access and equity policies and has appointed an experienced disability support counsellor.

The list of dot points does not adequately convey the way the TAFE environment has been changed by the presence of Dial-a-Lunch students. 'It's rubbed off on the other TAFE students because the dal students are such a joyous bunch, their pleasure is infectious. Their presence has raised the awareness of other staff about the learning needs of all students.' Senior managers at Gordon Institute are proud of the Dial-a-Lunch program.

It's important to note that Marie spends considerable time with other employers in the hospitality industry encouraging them to take on employees trained by Dial-a-Lunch. Next year six young people will leave the company for open employment so another six can come in. This concept of flow is important because the company does not want Dial-a-Lunch to be a job for life.

⁵ A DVD about Dial-a-Lunch can be ordered through the dal website <<http://www.dal.org.au>>.

Minurmarghali Mia Centre Pilbara TAFE and the mining industry

Over the past 10–15 years, mining companies in the Pilbara region of Western Australia have been working with secondary (and more recently with primary) schools to encourage Indigenous students to achieve at a high standard and stay at school. They have been trying, especially in the past few years, to build genuine two-way links with Indigenous communities. Pilbara Iron, a member of the Rio Tinto Group has been instrumental in this development and has fostered a number of programs including:

- ✧ the Gumala Mirnuwarni secondary schools project, linked to the Polly Farmer Foundation; it has been adapted by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training as Follow the Dream and introduced in scores of Western Australian schools
- ✧ the Tom Price Pathways program designed and sponsored by Pilbara Iron and Pilbara TAFE. Tom Price Senior High School and Apprenticeships WA have influenced other provision.

To give the reader a feel for what the building of these sound and dynamic relationships is like, the research team thought the field notes—written up by one of our members on the plane back from Hedland to Perth—would be useful.

Field notes (in flight) 18 August 2005

Yesterday Woodside Petroleum conducted an information session at MM [Minurmarghali Mia] for the Roebourne Aboriginal community about the construction of Train 5 for the Northwest Shelf. It will take about six years to build, and Woodside, like all the mining companies up here, needs skilled Aboriginal workers if they are to meet construction targets. But it is more than a labour market concern. They are genuinely committed now to working with Indigenous communities.

About 70 community people turned up for the briefing. I didn't realise there would be that many—perhaps the others did. I should check. Back to the number of attendees: the probability of employment after training is a strong incentive.

The briefing was followed by a meeting of the Woodside people with the MM team to talk about what kind of training the College might offer. They came up with a two-pronged approach: a general pre-employment course involving first aid, OHS, Internet use etc. and then another more focused one.

The program they came up with will have to be verified by Woodside, since they are paying for it. The Campus Director at Pundulmurra will have to sign off on it, too, but he has already okayed it in principle. The Director of Pilbara TAFE doesn't specifically have to see this arrangement—his support for all these industry initiatives is well known.

That was yesterday. Today the MM staff are talking about setting up interviews and testing applicants for the program. Things move very quickly! I commented to J, this all sounded very exciting—as she talked, her enthusiasm was obvious. She said this is the part of the work she loves. She then talked about how hard it was sometimes, but that it had its really good moments like this to compensate.

Postscript: when the team returned to the Pilbara two months later, in early November, there were three 'Woodside groups' in training. Two were learning construction skills, the third was a sort of 'finishing' business course for people who were already skilled to broaden the areas they could work in. They saw teachers from Minurmarghali Mia working alongside trainers from Woodside and jointly trying to resolve issues like attendance.

These are not traditional partnerships where each party comes to the table with a well-defined role and carries out its bit of the enterprise, with the TAFE institute usually there to deliver a set training component. The director of one TAFE actually tells people his institute is *not* a training provider. 'Yes, we do provide training', he will say, 'and we have training expertise, but what we want to do is work with you in developing whatever might be useful. We might not deliver any training at all'. With this arrangement the interaction is fluid and the boundaries blurred. They are, as one person pointed out, 'more organic'.

The shift in relationships also changes notions of contributions. Instead of thinking of the resources committed by the community partner(s) as 'leveraging', in this blurred model resources are pooled rather than transferred. The director 'who isn't a training provider' says that it becomes hard to determine who came up with what idea. Waterhouse and his colleagues (2006) describe the roles in these relationships as hybridised: neither party is operating as it had been. In the language of ecology, one would say hybrid species have been produced from the cross-fertilisation of roles and responsibilities.

Making use of the findings

Overview

The research reported here was undertaken to be of practical use. This chapter, therefore, is directed to those whom, we believe, should find it applicable, and even important, in their work.

Practitioners, managers and executives within TAFE institutes

The original proposal promised ‘a set of evidence-based protocols which VET managers could use to merge their ‘top-down’ equity/diversity strategies with ‘bottom-up’ initiatives’. What we had not fully appreciated, although in retrospect we should have, is that merging is a two-way process. Practitioners expect, and want, to be part of the process. Thus, the protocol outlined here is for collaborative use by practitioners, middle managers and senior executive.

The protocol is presented in two sections because there is a step prior to building synergy within institutes. That step concerns practitioner collaboration. We noticed that where practitioners truly work and think as a cohesive group, the drive for continual improvement is strongest. The community-of-practice literature tells us to expect this (for example, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). We also observed that such groups tend to have an effective voice in the organisation, greater even than ‘official’ units which are less cohesive. Since the protocol proposed here requires parity amongst practitioners, managers and executive, there is a brief first section titled Strengthening practitioner collaboration. This is followed by the section: A protocol for merging practice and strategy.

Policy-makers and funding agents responsible for equity in the VET sector

Besides the role that policy settings might play in fostering strong practitioner groups, the research findings showed that if equity practice and strategy *within* institutes are to jointly sustain improved training and outcomes for disadvantaged clients, then external agencies which fund equity initiatives and set policy directions need to incorporate a developmental dimension in their programs—indeed, make long-term development a central feature of funding programs. The later section, System funding of initiatives: an investment paradigm, describes an investment model which is being used to good effect in other public service sectors, for example, in health.

Concerned local communities

Businesses, industry, agencies, local government and others in the community interested in countering disadvantage have an activist role to play which benefits both equity groups and TAFE institutes. A brief section reminds them (and TAFE institutes) of the leadership that can, rightly, come from other than VET professionals.

These sections are followed by a concluding comment intended for all readers.

Strengthening practitioner collaboration

This is not the first study to find that the opportunity for serious professional interaction is an *essential* foundation for intelligent, practical and sustained improvement in the delivery of services to clients. In fact, the finding that trusted networks are critical and the recommendation that opportunities to build them be provided have been a constant theme in VET research reports over the last five years and across a wide range of research topics (see, for example, Mitchell, Wood & Young 2001; Centre for Undertaking Research in Vocational Education & University of Ballarat 2003; Bean 2004; Callan 2004; Clayton, Fisher & Hughes 2005; Simons, Harris & Smith 2006). It perplexes us that such an unambiguous directive for what should be a common feature of VET remains a sporadic effort without systematic long-term support. Why is that? Perhaps it is because people in many parts of the system have a role to play, so no single group feels responsible. This project helped to pinpoint factors and, hence, which parties can best address the problem. They comprise the following groups.

Practitioners

It is practitioners who must make the first move because they alone can identify colleagues whose work needs to be joined with others. The mutuality of support amongst practitioners in several groups we observed seemed so natural that we had to forcefully remind ourselves that there had been one key person pushing the collaboration along at the start, and there had often been bumps along the way.

Institute management

It is not always easy for people to develop the level of trust required. It is useful if the institute has, as some do, in-house expertise in team-building that is freely available on request. The other resource which practitioners need, and know they need, is space—both temporal and physical—in which to reflect together, try things together, and just be together. A recent article in the *McKinsey Quarterly* talks about personal *interaction* as the heart of ‘tacit work’—work that is ‘non-routine which requires making decisions on the basis of knowledge, judgement, experience and instinct’ (Johnson, Manyika & Yee 2005). Time for interaction in the current VET climate is a scarce resource. This is an area where management can show leadership: supplying time and ensuring that there are physical spaces readily at hand which invite casual conversation, where people can drift in and out, but where the discussion itself is sustained.

System leaders

Providing opportunities and encouragement for practitioners to spend ‘thinking time’ together is an operational issue. Nonetheless, imbuing the sector with a culture that values and expects time for collaborative professional reflection is subtly conveyed—or is not—by the policies and attitudes of system leaders and the resources they make available.

A protocol for merging practice and strategy

The protocol described here is intended to be of immediate use. It is also the beginning—or so we hope—of a managed iterative process which would see it tested and refined and, if it were found to advance the capacity of institutes to improve delivery and outcomes for disadvantaged clients, developed into a sophisticated interactive electronic guide. The protocol has been designed with TAFE institutes in mind, since the analysis is based on fieldwork primarily conducted at TAFE sites; however, it may prove useful to other training providers interested in reversing inequity.

The protocol elements are set out in figure 3 and explained in the text that follows.

Figure 3 Protocol for merging equity initiatives and strategies with TAFE institutes



Core purpose and associated domains

The protocol is intended to direct effective equity practices, policies and strategies into a developmental program whereby knowledge and resources are grown for the long term. There has been, in our view, an over-emphasis on *starting* initiatives and not enough on the development and scale-up of promising initiatives. An analogy might illustrate the problem: one of us, rather devoid of musical talent, was nevertheless compelled as a child to take piano lessons. On the occasions when she practised, she dutifully began at the beginning of the piece and played until she made a mistake. Then she'd start again. She got very good at the beginnings, as you would imagine, but never got to the end.

On the basis of the research undertaken here, the core purpose will be realised through three domains.

Define concerns precisely

As things stand, the aims of equity initiatives and strategies are often left very broad; for example, to improve outcomes for particular equity groups. Keep and Mayhew (2004) note a consistent vagueness in the end goals of VET policy. We recommend tightening the aims of equity initiatives and strategies within registered training organisations so the contribution which specific practices and supports for learners make towards improving outcomes can be investigated. Several examples of concerns that could be recast as specific questions to investigate within TAFE institutes surfaced consistently during the fieldwork:

- ❖ *Concern about weak articulation between pre-vocational and vocational programs:* if clearer and more direct pathways are established, is student retention and long-term achievement improved? Which 'side' needs to make adjustments to current provision to achieve better articulation: pre-vocational programs or the vocational program?
- ❖ *Concern about the high cost of case management and mentoring:* since generous support for disadvantaged learners through case management and mentoring is a proven mechanism for helping them, are there ways to reduce the costs of these supports? Are the outcomes from the less expensive schemes good enough?
- ❖ *Concern about delivering project-based and personalised learning:* one of the major ways by which vocational education and training distinguishes itself from other education sectors is through the active 'hands on' development of skills and knowledge. However, project-based and personalised learning can be demanding of teachers. Constructing portfolios of pedagogical resources may make the task somewhat easier. So the research would encompass the creation of some of these portfolios, investigate their use and ask whether student outcomes have been advanced.

Foster internal coherence

Five factors connecting staff in TAFE institutes were described in the previous chapter: organisational planning, budgets and resources, accountability, knowledge brokerage, and organisational culture. While each may require more or less attention in the context of a particular institute, two seem to present difficulties quite widely. They concern accountability and resources:

- ✧ *Address inconsistencies in accountability measures:* there are necessary differences in the accountability requirements of staff at different levels in TAFE institutes since they are doing different jobs. The question is whether the differences interfere with ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ understanding one another, or whether, in the worst case, they actually promote misunderstanding. One way around the problem is through a hierarchy of measurable outcomes which includes the ‘signals of success’ each level looks for. An example is outlined in the box below; the conceptual foundation for the hierarchy was described earlier.

| An outcomes hierarchy model | |
|---|---|
| Outcomes | Planned actions |
| Ultimate outcome  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ employment ✧ self-employment ✧ client's self-defined goal |
| Intermediate outcome  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ retention ✧ module completion ✧ successful participation in another pre-vocational course ✧ successful participation in another vocational course ✧ student contact hour profile contract met |
| Activity  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ learner confidence, resilience ✧ social capital developed within the learner group |
| Need | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ attendance ✧ improved physical health and other personal attributes (see Schuller et al. 2001, p.20) |

There will be those who blanch at the idea of reporting more outcomes, and the hierarchical sequence would certainly need to be trialled extensively and in many contexts. It may be one way, however, to answer the strangely elusive question put to us about disadvantaged clients: what leaves the ‘equity’ room: a qualification? a competency? a person?

Outcomes also need to be made as visible as possible. One observer described a TAFE graduation ceremony where a dozen students with a disability received qualifications ranging from certificate IV to advanced diploma: ‘such a strong outward sign of success in mainstream programs sends a very powerful message about equity internally’. It does.

- ✧ *Transparency of resource allocation:* while institute resources are inevitably tight, they are there, and practitioners and middle level managers believe that armed with political acumen, advocates of standing, and a sound business case, they might gain long-term investment in what began as a short-term equity initiative. The steps outlined in the box below set out the general dimensions of a sound equity business case.

The business case for equity proposals

- ✧ State the problem or need that is being addressed and link it to the institute's strategic plan.
- ✧ Provide sound evidence for the validity of what is proposed. What has gone before that indicates this is a useful or purposeful way to proceed?
- ✧ Ideally the proposal is part of a continuing program of innovation and investigation. It would be useful to frame the argument as an investment rather than a one-off.
- ✧ Understand and discuss the implications the initiative will have for other parts of the institute—use of space, IT, student flows etc.
- ✧ Provide a comprehensive risk analysis and management plan to ensure the initiative will not place the organisation in jeopardy.
- ✧ Budget carefully and in detail.
- ✧ Identify individuals/agencies outside the institute who would benefit from (and support) the initiative.
- ✧ Understand and anticipate external opponents to the initiative.
- ✧ Identify strategies for influencing external stakeholders.
- ✧ Try to acquire some funding externally first; being able to leverage other resources is a winning consideration.

Keep in mind throughout that you are asking for resources to which others are also staking a claim. Build into the case a basis for making trade-offs in your favour but never over-promise.

Cross-subsidisation is an issue which is discussed informally in many forums but, within VET at least, the discussion tends to stay informal. The problem is that cross-subsidisation is frowned upon in many circles as undermining transparency and accountability (for example, Australian Treasury 2003; Australian Quarantine Inspection Service 2002). There are other agencies, however, which are more open about its use. For example, Telstra acknowledged in meeting with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission that complying with its Universal Service Obligation 'requires a degree of cross-subsidisation between its urban and rural customers' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1999).

People we spoke to about this issue (many outside the VET sector) point out that, in many large organisations, not least universities, there are 'profit centres' and 'loss centres' and that it is sound financial management, rather than improper practice, to flexibly allocate funds so that valued services can be provided. What we heard consistently was that, where the goal is social justice and community capacity-building, the flexible, strategic use of resources is to be commended not deplored. A small but related point that surfaced on a number of occasions was the issue of institutes charging overheads against funded initiatives intended to promote equity. At the least, there should be clear policies in place about the overheads issue.

There may be some confusion about what is and what isn't cross-subsidisation. Is putting an outreach student into an unfilled vocational place cross-subsidisation? Is trading student contact hours so pre-vocational programs can be linked with vocational ones? There may be confusion, too, between 'shandy funding', where funds from various sources are necessarily combined to provide the integrated service needed to meet needs of the client group, and cross-subsidisation.

It is important to note that what gives rise to concern about cross-subsidisation in the first place is the very widespread belief that funding formulas, even for equity initiatives, rarely reflect the true cost of meeting the often complex and diverse needs of these clients. The example was given earlier of the intellectually disabled learners in a small class who took four semesters to complete Certificate I in Horticulture; standard funding allows only one semester with at least 15 students attending.

A suggestion put to us was that the true cost of delivering programs to disadvantaged learners be reported. Instead of reporting only on what was directly funded, registered training organisations should be asked to indicate the actual associated full costs of delivery. The absence of information about real costs is a feature we noticed in studying the ten equity initiatives. The descriptive reports of these initiatives fail to mention the central feature of the programs: the money. These documents do not discuss, or even allude to, the dollars granted and how they were spent. The more we have

thought about this, the more puzzled we are. Why the coyness about economic realities? Why ignore them, especially when the intent is to understand what was effective so it can be sustained, which often means finding the resources that made them successful.

Broker community links

The third domain the protocol addresses is that of community and industry stakeholders interested in reversing disadvantage. This goes beyond simply identifying partnerships or leveraging community resources to provide a spectrum of services to particular groups. There is a large leadership role implied here, dare one say even a little *noblesse oblige*, where TAFE institutes take upon themselves a fundamental role in community development, as indeed, many do. In this sense of working for a common cause, what we again wish to emphasise is the purpose of *accumulating* experience and, hopefully, resources so that the ability to serve disadvantaged learners continually improves.

Mechanism(s) for evaluation and adaptation

One of the disappointing findings of this study was how little robust evaluation is carried out of initiatives or, indeed, of whole funding programs. The reports and reviews which purport to be evaluations tend to be descriptions, quotes and anecdotes rounded out with cursory short-term outcome statistics (for example, gained employment, gained traineeship, didn't complete). What we should be aiming for is sound, probing research, including longitudinal studies. Benchmarking might also be encouraged; for example, what percentage of clients from a particular equity group needs a significantly extended period of support to become successful VET learners? What lowers that percentage or the duration and for what groups? Different pedagogy? Different support structures? Different timetabling?

This is research that may also be best carried out at the institute level rather than at a grander scale where aggregation of data tends to mask interesting particulars. In terms of the protocol outlined here, evaluation (and subsequent adaptation) might be assigned to groups responsible for knowledge brokerage. Knowledge brokerage, as it is being redefined (see earlier) is not the task of individuals acting as purveyors of ideas and advice, but it is the bringing-together of colleagues with diverse talents to experiment with and adapt initiatives that have demonstrated their promise. We strongly recommend that knowledge brokerage and evaluation in this sense be key aspects of the protocol in use.

Entity for leadership and deliberation

The evidence, and indeed the advice, from both practitioners and senior managers is that a well-structured ongoing deliberative forum constitutes the best base for the *long-term* acquisition of knowledge and resources to reverse learners' disadvantages. The following are the key features of such a committee, or perhaps better, of an internal commission.

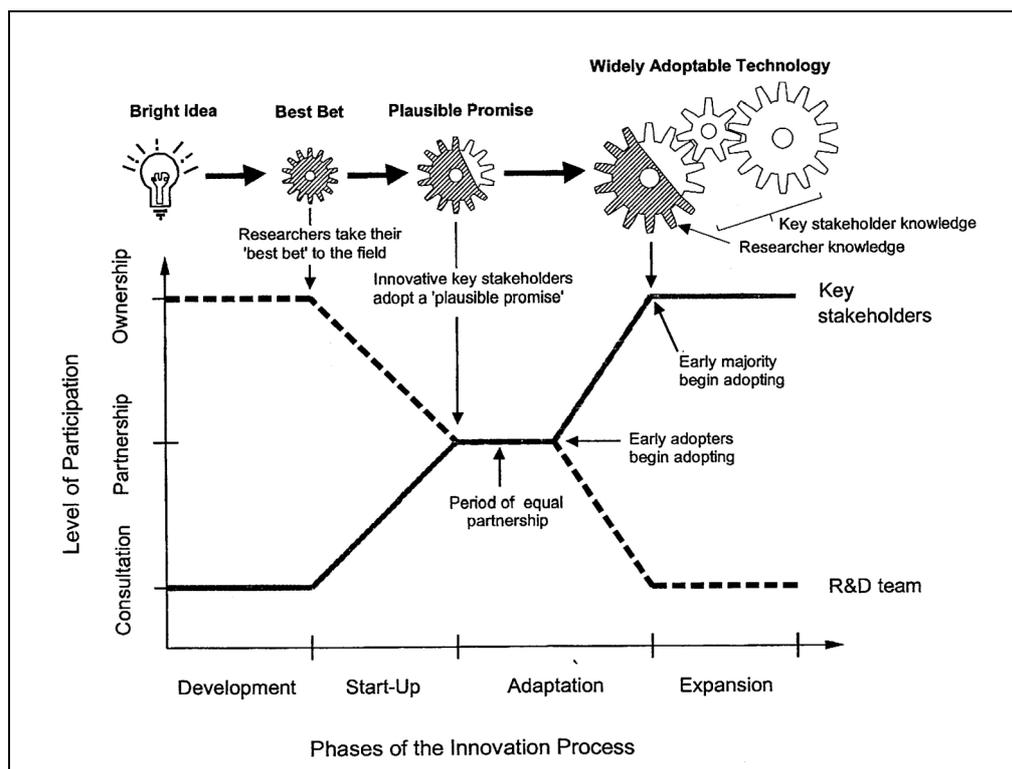
- ✧ It is not focused on sponsoring new equity initiatives but on the development and scale-up of promising ones.
- ✧ Its small membership should include practitioners, middle managers and senior executives from across the institute who are chosen because of the respect they command; it may be worth considering the inclusion, too, of a client representative.
- ✧ It needs to meet regularly, establish procedures to minimise non-attendance, and be supported by an adequately resourced secretariat.

The critical point will be to prevent this being just another task group. For that reason we rather warm to the idea of a 'commission'.

System funding of initiatives: An investment paradigm

Special funding is an effective lever for fostering immediate change in practice. Initial change, however, is far more fragile than the ‘seed funding’ model takes into account. Douthwaite (2002) depicts the initial change as a cogwheel—a plausible promise—and provides convincing evidence that for it to ‘mesh in’ to an existing system, it needs to be tried and adapted in different contexts (see Context chapter). The knowledge acquired through these various trials will subsequently be brought together. The cogwheel increases in size to represent the increase in knowledge it now contains and the picture moves from a single cogwheel to interlocked ones, as pictured in figure 4.

Figure 4 Douthwaite’s innovation process



Source: Douthwaite (2002)

Our study corroborates Douthwaite’s analysis: repeated use of the original initiative, even within the original group of practitioners, improves it. The seed funding model focuses on the first step and leaves subsequent cycles of adaptation and collaboration to others. An investment model would build those subsequent phases into the original program with the proviso, of course, that evaluation demonstrates that it *is* promising enough to continue through further cycles.

Where the special funding is largely used for consumables, the adaptation phase(s) might include a directive to look for more cost-effective ways to implement the new practice. For example, the gradual (and uneven) development of partnerships between disability employment agencies and group training organisations to increase apprenticeships for people with a disability eventually reached a stage where the actual cost of supporting such partnerships for the long term could be calculated (ANTA 2005, case study p.93). The long-term commitment of the three non-government-sponsored initiatives in our study is an example of an investment mindset.

There are government programs that have been sustained for a number of years which provide support for disadvantaged learners in VET. The sense from our fieldwork, however, is that the extra funding is repeated without systematic accumulation of experience—as if it is trapped at Douthwaite’s start-up ‘plausible promise’ stage. Since the problem here is not short-termism or lack

of commitment, but missing the opportunity to acquire and broker what is being learned on the ground, reframing these programs as investment ought to be relatively straightforward.

An issue raised consistently by our informants, which an investment model might resolve, concerns equity programs where funding is withheld unless specific outcomes are achieved. This kind of arrangement fails to acknowledge that there is a difference between the effectiveness of a training program and returns from that training. Doucouliagos and Sgro (quoted in Dawe 2003) point out that employment, often the outcome demanded, is a *return* on investment in training gained by both the individual and society. Whether that return is realised depends on many factors besides the skills or qualifications acquired; for example, on the availability of suitable work and the health, family circumstances and motivation of the person trained.

While there is much that is missed when initiatives are only seeded or renewed without systematic accrual (and dissemination) of the experience gained, there is—to complicate matters—a role for funded special initiatives. They have the advantage of a distinct and recognisable identity just because they are *special*. The specialness issue is a paradoxical one and one that others, including funding agencies, are grappling with:

We've been funding a program for a targeted equity group for several years now. Originally [training] providers had to apply for grants and detail the specific project they would undertake, but that was getting onerous for them and for us. And we could see the pattern of what was effective: case management and strong community links. So we're thinking about making it a standard part of institute funding. But then it loses its badge and that may be a problem. It's easier to go to the community if it's badged, and community agencies contribute a lot—doing case management, for example. On the other hand, the community gets exhausted: 'why are they asking again for a letter of support?'

It's not only the badge you lose. The flexibility is lost, like providing breakfast and lunch. You can't do that with a mainstream course. Also the staff ratio. The innovativeness might be lost too. We're trying to figure out the balance. It's not easy.

Another feature lost when a specially badged equity initiative becomes a normal budget item is its exemption from an institute's normal outcomes accountability framework. The pressure for completions and for efficient completions is less for special programs. The two-edged value of this specialness was phrased slightly differently by one equity manager: 'I look for pilot funding when I want to get something done. It's easier to get things done because it sits to the side. The problem is, it doesn't change anything, it doesn't change the system.'

To summarise the study, the tasks we are assigning to system policy-makers lie in three domains.

- ✧ *Rethink* the mechanisms currently used to stimulate innovative equity practice—to move (in large measure) from short-term funding of additional support for staff and/or clients to long-term cycles of adaptation of plausible promises, so that sufficient knowledge is accumulated (including how to minimise costs) such that effective new practice can be embedded across system(s).
- ✧ *Clarify* the priority of equity—of second- and third-chance education and training for disadvantaged learners in today's VET system—so practitioners and the community can see what leaders intend the system to look like in 10–20 years' time.
- ✧ *Signal* to practitioners that the system recognises the critical role of professional collaboration.

We recognise this is a demanding list. The findings of our study, adding weight to those of previous ones, leave us no choice, despite the fact that the changes implied are unlikely to be cost-neutral. All this is particularly urgent in light of the predicted increase, and already noticeable bulge, in the number of disadvantaged learners coming into VET.

Advice for community and industry stakeholders

There is ongoing argument about the responsiveness and flexibility of TAFE institutes to the special needs of equity groups which is entirely outside the ken of our research. What we can comment on is the vibrancy of equity practice that results from a strong outside agency instigating the initiative, not merely requesting tailored training. There is a blurring of roles in ventures where the imperative to build a workforce or put disengaged youth back on track, whatever the purpose, overrides specified assignments of duties. This is a hybridisation of roles, to use Waterhouse's (in press) apt phrase. The equity groups who are the target of these initiatives benefit, as does the TAFE institute involved, in terms of expanding its range and capacity.

We would like to see our research used to encourage outside agencies, local businesses, local government etc. to bring their ideas to their local TAFE institute and to create these joint ventures. The Dial-a-Lunch initiative provides an excellent model where, with ANTA funding, quality materials have been produced. Dial-a-Lunch is determined to help others interested in setting up community businesses to train and employ people with special needs. They suggest that the local TAFE be the first 'port of call' for these groups and advise the TAFE contacted to willingly take on the role of an equal or even junior partner, perhaps merely brokering arrangements for others.

A concluding comment

The preceding sections of this chapter have singled out various 'players' associated with equity in vocational education and training and detailed avenues each might explore if they want to take advantage of the significant findings of this research. That approach was necessary because responsibility for those parts of the VET infrastructure needing attention is dispersed. This approach, however, completely contradicts the ecological perspective that has proved such a powerful tool throughout the study. Ecology is concerned with mapping all the various and complex relationships operating in a particular environment into a coherent whole. Even the image of a VET infrastructure, which has also helped our thinking, suggests a single frame.

Thus, we need to conclude the report by putting back together the pieces we have taken apart. Three ecological principles or characteristics of healthy ecosystems are particularly apt for the purpose:

- ✧ *Interdependence*: this covers recognising what the different parties can contribute to supporting one another and how this is best accomplished. Our research started with recognition of the interdependence between practitioners' work and the equity strategies of their TAFE institute. We found that critical interdependencies went far beyond internal institute synergies to include policies set by VET systems to encourage innovation and ensure disadvantaged clients benefit from it for the long term, and the intelligence and experience of agencies, businesses and industry in local communities.
- ✧ *Dynamic tension*: there is a common, mistaken belief that healthy ecosystems are in tranquil, balanced equilibrium. In fact ecosystems are dynamic, subject to an unending series of disturbances. Readjustment triggers—necessitates—adaptive behaviours and new relationships (new interdependencies). In human organisations such adjustment often generates tension. What needs to be understood is that tension is a natural and indeed vital, if sometimes frustrating, part of adaptation in dynamic environments.
- ✧ *Sensory mechanisms*: in a natural ecosystem, communication amongst living species and the mechanisms through which they receive information about the physical environment are scientific questions. In human systems communication may also be subtle, but the mechanisms are more limited and better understood, if not always used wisely or well. In the equity field what needs to be communicated (beyond 'normal' interdependency interaction and resolution of tension) is knowledge, systematically accumulated, that will help to embed effective means for countering disadvantage.

If there is to be long-term progress in overcoming the barriers to effective learning that burden so many individuals from equity groups, then substantial adjustments will need to be made to some current modes of operation. An equally significant finding, however, is that within TAFE institutes and, as far as we are able to judge because it was not a focus of the research, within systems, there is a real willingness to experiment with new approaches. The VET sector has traditionally held reversing disadvantage to be a core mission. Everyone we spoke to considers it to be a present and future mission also. That belief is what makes optimism not only possible, but reasonable.

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The National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program is coordinated and managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through the Department of Education, Science and Training.

This program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector.

Research funding is awarded to organisations via a competitive grants process.

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