

Advanced VET Practitioners

Developing their capabilities, cultivating their minds

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Background

Dedication

As Etienne Wenger (2008, p.105) notes, our professional practices “deal with the profound issue of how to be a human being”. This book is dedicated to those outstanding people who, in their VET work, have extended themselves as human beings and can be described as advanced VET practitioners. The photographs of some of them are on the cover of this book and their stories and others’ stories are contained within.

The case for valuing advanced practice

The drive to upskill Australia’s workforce depends significantly on the capacity of the vocational education and training (VET) system to deliver new and customised services in workforce development. A key question is whether the VET system has the human capability to deliver these services.

This publication shows that an advanced strand of VET practitioners is emerging in Australia, providing leadership in the development and delivery of these customised services. This advanced practice is critical to the future impact of VET and deserves significant analysis and promotion.

In unpacking and examining the concept of advanced professional practice, the case will be built over the course of this publication for more VET workforce development programs to focus on advanced or leading edge practice, not just novice or beginner-level practice. While the professional practice of new entrants to the VET workforce is critical, the practice of those at the leading edge is also vitally important to the impact of the sector.

As this publication shows, leading edge practice in VET can be described, understood, modelled and acquired, over a period of time. Hence the publication includes suggestions about multiple and effective ways to develop advanced VET practitioners and to further cultivate the minds and capabilities of existing advanced VET practitioners.

Background

The book is specifically based around:

- an adaptation of 30 articles that I wrote from 2007 to early 2009 in my ‘Inside VET’ column for *Campus Review*, the national Australian weekly publication for tertiary education
- four conference papers I have presented on some VET practitioners’ capabilities for using change agency to drive change, their capabilities for networking with industry, their enthusiasm for improving their practice, and their extraordinary features and attributes.
- ideas from the international literature on professional practice.

The book also draws on findings from some published reports that I have prepared by clients, including:

- Mitchell, J.G. (2007c), *Building a New Practice. Implementing the Four Paradigm Model of Service Delivery*, Challenger TAFE, Fremantle, WA.

- Mitchell, J.G. (2008b), *Improving the Bottom Line: Why Industry Values TAFE NSW*, NSW DET, Sydney.
- Mitchell, J.G. (2008c), *Confident RPL assessors*, QLD DETA, Brisbane.

Finally, the book was influenced by my involvement with and reports on workforce development programs in networking, change agency, communities of practice for the national staff development program *Reframing the Future* from 2000-2008 and from my many other projects with governments, training providers and professional development agencies.

Structure

I have arranged the articles in six sections, to assist you to identify topics of most interest. For each section I have provided a one-page guide which includes an overview of the articles and their highlights and a list of other articles in this book on the same theme. In each section this one-page guide is followed by an introductory essay based on a research paper or report I have prepared.

Within each section, I have modified or expanded on the original articles from *Campus Review* by updating the content of articles, where appropriate, to ensure the articles are current and relevant, and by adding questions and topics for discussion, to encourage reflection and conversations.

In addition, the book contains:

- a discussion section tracking the emergence of the advanced VET practitioner, including definition of key terms (Introduction) and a discussion on how to cultivate the minds of advanced VET practitioners (Conclusion)
- an index of the articles and the organisations profiled (Attachment 1)
- suggestions for the different ways facilitators can use the book (Attachment 2) followed by references and further reading to encourage you to follow up on topics.

Target users

While the book is relevant to all VET personnel, some particular individuals or groups who could use this book include:

- VET practitioners who want to become advanced practitioners or advanced VET practitioners who want to keep developing their practice
- people involved with the Training and Assessment (TAA) Training Package, at both Certificate IV and Diploma level; people undertaking other study programs in vocational, adult or further education; and project groups undertaking structured professional development activities
- leaders of VET organisations and managers of professional development who are interested in understanding and fostering advanced practice.

While individuals are encouraged to use the book, you will also benefit significantly by participating in groups examining the articles. With the assistance of a group facilitator, you can use the book to generate more ideas. I have set out in Attachment 2 some ideas for facilitators, on ways to use the book with groups.

Thanks

My thanks are extended to the people described in the articles, especially for their support for the preparation of the original articles and for giving permission for their photographs to be used, my clients whose projects have greatly influenced this publication, and *Campus Review* editor Julie Hare.

Introduction: Tracking the emergence of the advanced VET practitioner

The introduction serves a number of purposes:

- it describes the new vocational education and training (VET) practitioner, a description which sits comfortably on a large number of practitioners in the VET sector
- it compares the new VET practitioner with the advanced VET practitioner, a much smaller group
- it tables definitions of key terms in this book – capability, practice, new practitioner and advanced practitioner
- it provides a brief review of the literature on the new VET practitioner and why the need emerged for a separate category of advanced VET practitioner
- it describes the research methods used to track the emergence of the advanced VET practitioner
- it discusses key findings from this tracking activity.

Overall, the introduction sets out the broad context for the rest of the publication by profiling the emergence of the advanced VET practitioner.

Background

Together with my colleagues Clive Chappell, Andrea Bateman and Susan Roy, my research for the consortium research project, which resulted in the NCVET publication, *Quality is the key: Critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in vocational education and training* (Mitchell et al. 2006), identified fifteen features of a notional ‘new VET practitioner’.

However, since that study was prepared in 2005, my ongoing research has identified the emergence of a more advanced version of the new VET practitioner. The research includes thirty interviews I undertook for my weekly column in *Campus Review* from 2007-2009 and included in this book, and a range of other research assignments in the VET sector, including:

- ten case studies from one training provider, Challenger TAFE (Mitchell 2007c)
- four case studies for a group of community colleges (Mitchell 2008ad)
- fifteen case studies for TAFE NSW (Mitchell 2008b)
- six VET case studies from a dual sector university (Aitkin & Mitchell 2008)
- fourteen stories written by leading assessors in Queensland (Mitchell 2008c) .

I also tested the ideas in a presentation at the AVETRA conference in Adelaide in April 2008 (Mitchell 2008a) and conducted workshops on the concept of the advanced VET practitioner for groups in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia during 2008.

From traditional to new practitioner

As discussed in *Ideas for Practitioners* (Mitchell 2006a), for the first three decades or so of VET's existence since its emergence in the early 1970s, albeit with some exceptions, VET was largely supply-driven. In this era VET organisations decided what was best for industry and communities, often with no or minimal consultation; and VET organisations focused primarily on curriculum issues such as teaching techniques, not primarily on industry's fluctuating needs.

The notional 'new VET practitioner' described in *Quality is the Key* (Mitchell et al. 2006) who emerged early in the twentieth century adopted a demand-driven mindset. This practitioner is in tune with the needs of industry and the community, and seeks to customise programs to suit both enterprises and individuals.

Table 1 provides a broad comparison of the supply-driven traditional practitioner with the new VET practitioner who emerged in the first half of the 2000s.

Table 1: Broad comparison on the traditional practitioner and the new VET practitioner

Summary of the traditional VET practitioner	Summary of the new VET practitioner
The notional 'traditional supply-driven VET practitioner' emerged in the 1970s, was focused on delivering great teaching and required the student to meet the VET organisation's expectations.	The notional 'new VET practitioner' emerged in the early 2000s, is demand-driven and focuses on helping the learner achieve his or her goals and seeks to meet industry and community expectations.

Some notes on categories of VET practitioners

The three categories of the traditional VET practitioner, the new VET practitioner and the advanced VET practitioner are notional in that they are a generalised picture of the practitioner. No one individual might have all the characteristics of, say, the new VET practitioner, as set out in Table 3 below.

The three categories of traditional, new and advanced are obviously insufficient to cover all VET practitioners. All three categories are meant to be categories of effective practitioners; that is, exponents of leading or good practice. I have not attempted to categorise or label groups who were or are less effective. However, I deliberately use the term novice in this Introduction and in the Conclusion to make the point that it takes many years for novices to become advanced practitioners.

Some notes on the VET shift from supply-driven to demand-driven

As mentioned above all three categories are meant to be categories of effective practitioners; good practice exponents in their historical periods. For instance, no criticism is meant of the traditional supply-driven VET practitioner who emerged in the 1970s. In that era, most educational services were supply-driven in the sense that educators took the view that they were the best or only ones who should decide what was right for the student.

Coinciding with the advent of online technology and the emergence of the information age in the mid-late 1990s, many service industries including education re-considered their attitudes to customers, particularly as customers were starting to seek increased choice and customised and even personalised services. For instance, VET students started to ask to enrol other than in February each year and whether they could study from home or work and attend classes less often. I discuss this historical phenomenon in my report for NCVET, *E-business and Online Learning: Connections and Opportunities for VET* (Mitchell 2003b).

In Mitchell, Latham, Bates and Smith (2001) we argued that flexible learning was a key response by VET to this push from customers for service industries to be more responsive. We argued that flexible learning is an essential component of a contemporary VET organisation that:

- is demand-driven not supply-driven
- is market-driven not technology-driven
- is driven by the value proposition for the customer, i.e. ‘What is in it for the customer?’
- meets customer expectations for speed, convenience, personalised service and lowest price
- meets customer expectations by enhancing service quality and/or reducing prices and/or improving products
- delights the customer, from the customer’s first contact with the organisation, to enrolling, to receiving services, to after-sales service
- seeks repeat business from the customer
- retains customers by offering holistic, integrated, personalised service
- values the life-long relationship with the customer. (pp.10-11)

In the above description, the customer could be either the individual VET student or the VET client such as an enterprise or the community or industry in general: the same principles apply to each group.

A quick note on supply versus demand-driven

While I am comfortable in describing this generalised shift by service organisations from being supply driven to demand driven, I am concerned that this will be interpreted as complete acceptance that “the customer knows best”, every time, with no exceptions. Even in the new era of customer responsiveness, there is still and always will be a need for educators to balance their understanding of customer needs with their professional judgment of what is appropriate. For instance, educators need to resist any customer pressures that might lead to the dilution of standards in training or assessment. VET educators – normally through industry skills councils – wisely seek advice from industry and the community on those standards, but VET educators also need to make an input to the process and seek to preserve those standards.

Emergence of an exceptional version of the demand-driven VET practitioner

While the new VET practitioner has many impressive characteristics, which I list below in Table 3, my subsequent research from 2006 onwards indicates that an exceptional version of this practitioner has emerged in recent times in the VET sector, who could be described as the ‘advanced VET practitioner’. While the new VET practitioner is demand-driven, the advanced VET practitioner has extraordinary capabilities for building client relationships, ensuring customer responsiveness and supporting flexible delivery. This superior strand of VET practitioner is raising the bar of professional practice and deserves public profiling. The following table summarises the features of these two categories of VET practitioner.

Table 2: Broad comparison of the new VET practitioner and the advanced VET practitioner

Summary of the new VET practitioner	Summary of the advanced VET practitioner
The notional ‘new VET practitioner’ is in tune with the needs of industry and the community, and seeks to customise programs to suit both enterprises and individuals	The notional ‘advanced VET practitioner’ has extraordinary capabilities for building client relationships, ensuring customer responsiveness and supporting flexible delivery