



What is 'social capital' and how can
vocational education and training
help develop it?

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About the research



What is 'social capital' and how can vocational education and training help develop it?

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Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system aims to give students practical skills and competencies. Recent research shows that in addition to these skills, VET students are also developing social capital through their training.

Social capital in this context comprises the networks, shared values and understandings between people, that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and work together.

This paper draws on several studies commissioned by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and discusses the link between social capital and vocational education and training.

Key messages

- ✧ Students are building social capital by developing new networks, and gaining confidence and self-esteem through the respect they receive from their teachers and classmates. This has helped some students, in particular marginalised young people, to find work and interact more easily with those around them.
- ✧ While many students are gaining social capital outcomes incidentally, VET instructors can provide additional opportunities for their students by encouraging them to interact and work collaboratively and inviting people from potentially useful networks to co-teach or participate in the training.
- ✧ VET providers can build social capital by developing partnerships with communities, schools and employers.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

Introduction

Recent research commissioned by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research has shown that vocational education and training (VET) courses, and partnerships between VET providers, schools, communities and employers are developing social capital and achieving positive social and employment outcomes for individuals and communities (Allison, Gorringer & Lacey 2006; Balatti, Black & Falk 2006; Kearns 2004; Stokes, Stacey & Lake 2006).

This paper examines the concept of social capital and the different forms it takes. The paper then discusses the link between social capital and vocational education and training, focusing on the social and employment outcomes achieved through VET courses and partnerships. The final section outlines what VET providers can do to develop social capital.

The concept of social capital

Social capital comprises the networks, shared values and understandings between people which enable individuals and groups to trust each other and work together (OECD 2001).

Members of a community with strong social capital are likely to be actively engaged in social and community groups, have a diverse range of networks, take time to volunteer and be politically interested.

Social capital also comprises the networks, links and relationships between organisations, institutions and nations. The World Bank (2008) describes social capital as the mechanism that shapes the quality of a society's social interactions and the 'glue' that holds societies' institutions together.

High levels of social capital have been linked with greater productivity, better personal health, improved child welfare, lower rates of child abuse, lower crime rates and better government. Social capital has also been linked to improved community safety, educational outcomes and general individual and community well-being (Woolcock 1998; OECD 2007).

Over time, the concept of social capital has been developed by a range of social theorists including Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Passeron and James Coleman (Farr 2004). The concept has been brought to prominence in recent years through the work of Robert Putnam. Putnam's *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (2000) argues that there has been a decline in American civic involvement in the late 20th century. His work has raised awareness, and stimulated debate, about social capital.

Types of social capital

There are three elements of social capital, namely: bonding, bridging and linking. It is useful to consider each of these elements to gain a stronger understanding of social capital as a concept.

- 1 Bonding social capital occurs where people develop networks and relationships with people who are like themselves or with whom they have something in common. This may include people of a common ethnic or religious background, family members or peers.
- 2 Bridging social capital occurs where people develop networks or relationships with people who are dissimilar to themselves. This may include people from a different age group or cultural, religious or educational background.
- 3 Linking social capital is where people interact, and develop links, with institutionalised power; for example, an individual linking with a government agency or service provider. Linking social capital also applies to trust between institutions or nations; for example, where these agree to cooperate based on a relationship characterised by trust rather than a contractual arrangement.

Bonding networks and relationships are characterised by high levels of trust; they are the connections people use when they need help or favours. These networks contribute to a high level of general well-being and can prevent social isolation and loneliness, particularly as people age (Swedish National Institute of Public Health 2007). However, while bonding social capital usually has positive outcomes, it may also prevent wider social cohesion. For example, a group of tightly bonded people may exclude themselves or others from wider society. Tightly bonded groups may also use their networks to serve ends that are not in the public interest. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) gives the example of highly bonded groups—such as drug cartels, mafia operations and terrorist groups—that ‘embody high levels of internal trust and reciprocity’, but use bonding social capital in ways that may not serve the wider public interest (ABS 2002, pp.8–9). Social exclusion may also occur within tightly knit groups or communities that are reluctant to accept newcomers or minority groups.

Accompanying high levels of bonding social capital with bridging social capital, including a strong diversity of networks, may combat the potential downside of bonding social capital and promote greater community acceptance and social cohesion.

Social capital and vocational education and training

VET students developing social capital

VET courses are designed to give students a range of specific competencies leading to a qualification. The research discussed in this paper shows that, in addition to the planned course outcomes, VET students develop social capital and gain a range of wider benefits from their studies.

In a recent study, Balatti, Black and Falk (2006) find that 80% of adult literacy and numeracy students reported a social capital outcome from their course participation. Such outcomes include: new networks and enhanced interaction with fellow students and instructors, and improved ability to interact with authority and socialise with others (Balatti, Black & Falk 2006). In terms of social outcomes, the researchers give the example of a woman who came to Australia from Hong Kong and experienced social isolation prior to attending an adult literacy and numeracy course. In undertaking the course, she developed new friendships and began attending the gym regularly with one of these friends.

The same study also shows that through undertaking vocational education and training, students experience changes in their trust of, and their beliefs and interactions with, people who differ from themselves. Similarly, Allison, Gorringer and Lacey (2006) find that training acts as a social link, connecting people and enabling them to engage more strongly with their studies and their instructors and peers. These outcomes are both bonding and bridging social capital.

Trust between people is a key element of social capital and Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006) report that young people undertaking vocational education and training highly value the trust and respect of their instructors. Students in both studies reported feeling respected and valued by their teachers and peers, in contrast to their memories of school. For example, the study by Balatti, Black and Falk (2006) asked students how they felt they were treated by their VET teachers. The most frequent response was that they were treated 'with respect' (p.33). The researchers note that: 'the contrast with remembered school experience was commented on often, especially by disaffected young people' (Balatti, Black & Falk 2006, p.33). Increased respect and trust makes it easier for students to build new networks and relate to others. Balatti, Black and Falk (2006) give the example of a young male student who struggled to deal with teachers and those in authority at school. While attending a VET course, he became much more responsive to authority figures, teachers and his peers as he felt that he was treated with respect. This change in attitude enabled the student to approach employers and find employment.

These social capital outcomes are particularly beneficial for young people at risk of becoming disengaged from work or study. As Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006) observe, through vocational education and training, marginalised young people gain opportunities to continue their education, undertake work placements and build valuable employment networks.

Developing social capital outcomes for students

While many of these social capital outcomes occur incidentally, simply as a result of people undertaking VET studies, VET providers can actively foster and enhance social capital outcomes.

Forthcoming research by Balatti, Black and Falk outlines ways in which teachers can build social capital in their classes. For example, they can provide students with opportunities to build bonding and bridging social capital by encouraging them to work collaboratively. They may also enhance a student's trust by encouraging open and respectful interaction or invite people from potentially useful networks to co-teach or co-participate in training.

Linking social capital can be developed by setting tasks that require students to interact with networks they have not yet accessed and arranging for students to participate in activities beyond a class context. Such activities may help students to gain confidence in accessing new community groups, trying new things or interacting with unfamiliar institutions and service providers.

Social capital outcomes for communities

Vocational education and training can also be used to develop social capital in communities and businesses. Kearns (2004) describes ways in which VET can build this social capital, noting that social capital for businesses can be increased through enhanced networks and partnerships between VET providers and employers. This, in turn, can lead to work-ready employees and higher productivity (Stokes, Stacey & Lake 2006). Communities involved in VET partnerships have found that through the partnership, more young people are retained in education and supported into work (Stokes, Stacey & Lake 2006).

A partnership is formed when 'two or more people or organisations come together in a formal or informal arrangement to work cooperatively, on either a short- or long-term basis, to achieve common goals' (Griffin & Curtin 2007, p.3). VET providers, schools, community groups and employers may be involved in partnerships that develop both bridging and linking social capital through trust and networks.

A study by Allison, Gorringer and Lacey (2006) finds that relationships between education providers and industry create networks and generate social capital. The study examines the impact of VET partnerships on the development of sustainable communities in regional Australia. The researchers give the example of a regional partnership between local government, industry and the community that successfully established an effective and trusting partnership and, in doing so, fostered economic, social, and environmental sustainability in the region.

Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006) examine examples of successful partnerships between registered training providers, schools, industry groups and employers in rural and regional communities. Their research shows that regional areas gain economically from social capital developed through these partnerships; for example, through such partnerships local industry and business gain employees with valuable skills, experience and work attitudes. In addition, school-VET partnerships can provide education and employment opportunities for young people which can result in them remaining in their local communities. As Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006) write:

School-VET partnerships can assist rural and regional communities to keep more young people in the community, preventing their moving to metropolitan or larger regional areas. This contributes to community capacity-building and viability and maintains or strengthens economic capital (p.6).

Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006) describe the 'Whyalla Pre-Industry Program' as an example of a successful partnership. In this case, the local high school partnered with industry and TAFE (technical and further education) to meet the needs of marginalised young people. The program focused on unemployed youth and aimed to increase the number of young people available to enter the mechanical and electrical engineering fields through a fast-tracked pre-vocational program.

The partnership's overarching aim was to retain young people in the town and reduce unemployment. Each partner also had its own specific aims; for example, the school was eager to

re-engage students and provide better career paths and positive learning experiences. They also wanted to change employer attitudes about the employability of marginalised young people. Industry wanted to address a skills shortage and build the local workforce through a larger pool of apprentices. They also wanted to get young people with the 'right attitude' to work and develop a more stable workforce by hiring local people.

Many of the young people involved in the program were previously out of, or disengaged from, school and the program succeeded in enhancing their employment and educational outcomes. It also increased the local community's retention of young people. The researchers report that:

Employment outcomes were almost 90% of 30 young people in the first year of the program and around 80% of over 40 young people in the second year. Those who did not gain employment often returned for further education options, or to have a second run at the program. (Stokes, Stacey & Lake 2006, p.31)

The partnership also benefited the local TAFE insofar as it increased its capacity to recruit students, maintain steady numbers of students within courses and respond to industry needs.

This partnership was driven by trust between partners and a shared vision, including a commitment to positively contribute to the community, along with a shared sense of responsibility for 'looking after' the community's local young people. The partnership developed bonding, bridging and linking social capital among those involved through their regular interaction and shared vision for their community.

Developing partnerships

VET partnerships are usually structured around a specific aim or set of objectives. Stokes, Stacey and Lake (2006) outline different models that can be used to develop partnerships between VET providers, schools, communities and employers. Each model targets a different need; for example, a specialised program model targets a population and/or industry focus in a local area, whereas a whole-of-community model engages a broad spectrum of community members.

The researchers note that developing partnerships between VET providers, schools and communities is a strategic process and partnership members need to consider community needs and develop a model that will best respond to, and meet, those needs.

Kearns (2004) writes that if VET providers use a strategic approach to developing social capital in their communities, they can make a contribution to their community which may also have reciprocal benefits for the VET sector. Such benefits might include greater numbers of students, improved quality of outcomes and a greater capacity to meet industry needs by providing work-ready employees with skills and attitudes valued by employers.

Conclusion

In summary, social capital comprises the networks and shared norms that enable people to trust each other and work together, and high levels of social capital can achieve a variety of positive outcomes for communities. However, highly bonded groups should also develop bridging social capital to avoid social exclusion and work towards achieving wide social cohesion.

VET providers can play an important role in giving students confidence, self-esteem and a diverse range of networks in addition to the specific course competencies. These benefits may help students, in particular marginalised young people, to undertake further study or gain employment.

VET teachers can actively develop social capital outcomes by respecting students and using classroom activities that encourage students to interact and work collaboratively. VET providers can also develop social capital outcomes by developing partnerships with local schools, employers and communities.

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