

mainstream
provision
Linkages between
adult and
community
education vocational
education and
training
ACE provision
mainstream VET

Linkages between

ACE vocational provision

and **mainstream VET**

J Saunders

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ISBN 0 87397 739 4 print edition
0 87397 740 8 web edition

TD/TNC 66.75

Published by

National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd

ABN 87 007 967 311

252 Kensington Road, Leabrook, SA 5068
PO Box 115, Kensington Park, SA 5068, Australia



Contents

Acknowledgements.....	6
Executive summary	8
Introduction.....	16
Background.....	16
Methodology	18
General	18
ACE, mainstream VET and linkages defined	18
Persons and organisations consulted	19
Responses to survey questionnaires.....	19
Reporting of interview responses.....	20
The respondents	21
Providers	21
Industry representatives	23
Students.....	23
The ACE sector	27
ACE in New South Wales	27
ACE in South Australia	27
ACE VET provision.....	28
Perceptions of ACE vocational programs	29
Strengths of ACE VET.....	30
Criticisms of ACE VET	33
ACE vocational programs: Expectations and outcomes.....	34
Improving ACE VET provision	39
Appropriateness of offering various categories of training.....	39
Targetting industry needs.....	41
Risks associated with the move into vocational learning	48
ACE VET information	49
Awareness of ACE VET	49
Types of information provided.....	52
Sources of information	53
Improving ACE VET information.....	55
Preferred information sources and formats	55
Improving promotion of ACE and its vocational courses	57
ACE–mainstream VET interaction and linkages	66
Linkages	66
Interaction between ACE and mainstream VET.....	68

Improving ACE–mainstream VET interaction and linkages.....	80
Priorities for development of linkages.....	80
Improving linkage co-ordination and information exchange with mainstream VET	81
Assisting students to use linkages	82
Co-ordinators acting between ACE and mainstream VET.....	82
Incentives for collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET.....	83
ACE as a regional training broker or co-ordinator.....	83
Strategies for sharing resources and funding with mainstream VET.....	84
School–ACE–VET linkages.....	84
Conclusions.....	85
The nature of ACE	85
Recognition of ACE VET	85
Strengths of ACE VET.....	85
Future directions for ACE VET	86
ACE VET information provision	87
Pathways, linkages and credit transfer	87
ACE should complement mainstream VET.....	88
ACE–mainstream VET co-operation and collaboration	88
Concluding remarks	89
Bibliography	90
Appendix A: ACE vocational education provider questionnaire	
Appendix B: ACE vocational education student questionnaire	

List of tables and figures

Tables

Table 1: Positions held by ACE provider questionnaire respondents.....	21
Table 2: Geographic locations of providers.....	22
Table 3: Primary nature of provider respondent's organisation.....	22
Table 4: Types of learning offered	22
Table 5: Details of ACE personnel interviewed.....	22
Table 6: Details of industry representatives interviewed.....	23
Table 7: Sample of occupations stated by student respondents	25
Table 8: Geographic locations of students.....	26
Table 9: Provider ratings of 'strengths' of ACE VET.....	30
Table 10: Student ratings of 'strengths' of ACE VET	31

Figures

Figure 1: Age ranges of student respondents.....	24
Figure 2: Highest level of study completed.....	24
Figure 3: Student indications of length of course.....	25
Figure 4: Perception of student reasons for undertaking ACE vocational study	35
Figure 5: Student views on outcomes of ACE VET	36
Figure 6: Student satisfaction with various aspects of course provision.....	37
Figure 7: Student-provider comparison of predicted student vocational learning outcomes	38
Figure 8: NSW provider preferences for type of training (n=43)	39
Figure 9: SA provider preferences for type of training (n=18)	39
Figure 10: Student preferences for type of training	40
Figure 11: Student self-rating of knowledge about ACE vocational choices	49
Figure 12: Student responses re course accreditation	50
Figure 13: ACE opinion of mainstream VET knowledge of ACE VET.....	51
Figure 14: How students found out about their ACE course.	54
Figure 15: Sources of ACE vocational information preferred by students.....	55
Figure 16: Provider ratings of importance of information sources.....	56
Figure 17: Availability of ACE-mainstream VET pathways and credit transfer: Provider opinions	66
Figure 18: Outcomes from increased ACE competition with mainstream VET: NSW (n=42)	72
Figure 19: Outcomes from increased ACE competition with mainstream VET: SA (n=18)	72
Figure 20: Provider opinion of importance of ACE sharing specified resources with mainstream VET	78
Figure 21: Students in favour of sharing resources with mainstream VET.....	78
Figure 22: Provider ratings of strategies for development of linkages with mainstream VET.	81
Figure 23: Provider preferences for duties of an ACE-mainstream VET co-ordinator	82

Acknowledgements

A large part of the information obtained for this project came from a questionnaire-based survey of adult and community education (ACE) provider personnel and students. The questionnaires were complex and took some time to complete (some providers reported spending as long as two hours). The author would therefore like to acknowledge the patience and goodwill, both of providers and students, in completing the questionnaires. The fact that they were willing to devote so much time and diligence to what was quite an arduous task (the provider and student questionnaires contained 56 and 36 questions respectively) indicates the importance that ACE personnel and their students attach to the concept of ACE vocational learning.

A project of this nature is impossible without the assistance of knowledgeable and experienced people in the field. Special thanks therefore go to the following people from the ACE sector and industry bodies for the advice and information they gave in, what were in many cases, quite extended interviews:

Mr Bob Ayliffe	Tumbarumba Technology & Education Centre (NSW)
Ms Maria Barredo	Migrant Resource Centre of SA
Ms Karen Bartel	Australian Liquor, Hospitality & Miscellaneous Workers' Union (SA)
Mr Patrick Bayly	South Australian Food & Beverage Industry Training Council
Mr Dennis Binnion	Workers' Educational Association (SA)
Ms Sue Bishop	Board of Adult and Community Education (NSW)
Ms Sue Buxton	Manufacturing Learning SA
Mr David Byrne	Small Business Training Centre, Adelaide Institute of TAFE (SA)
Mr John Camillo	Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (SA)
Ms Ella Clarke	Tomaree Peninsula Adult Education Group (NSW)
Mr Paul Comyn	NSW Primary Industries ITAB
Ms Melita Cotterell	Eurobodalla Adult Education Centre (NSW)
Mr Alan Craig	Bankstown Community College (NSW)
Mr Adrian Dangerfield	Employers' Chamber (SA)
Ms Lyn Diskon	Christie Downs Community House (SA)
Mr Shane Earls	Information ITAB (SA)
Ms Christine Erskine	Board of Adult and Community Education (NSW)
Mr Doug Fahey	NSW Process Manufacturing ITAB
Ms Felicity Finch	Southern Mallee Community Education Group (SA)
Mr Duane Findley	Australian Business Limited (NSW)
Ms Gaye Follington	Central Coast Community College (NSW)
Ms Kathy Golder	Mount Gambier Mature Expertise Association (SA)
Ms Lin Gore	Barossa, Clare and Gawler Employment Training (SA)
Ms Eela Govender	Blacktown District Community College (NSW)
Ms Cherilyn Graham	Byron Place Community Centre (SA)
Ms Fiona Hancock	Australian Services' Union NSW Clerical & Administration
Mr John Harris	Robinson Education Centre (NSW)
Mr David Hullett	South Australian Light Manufacturing ITAB
Mr Jason Ingram	Hills District Day & Evening College (NSW)
Mr Peter Jones	Riverina Regional Council of ACE (NSW)

Ms Ruth Jurevicius	Professional and Community Education (SA)
Ms Fay Kitto	Board of Adult and Community Education (NSW)
Mr Colin Lawrence	Hunter Community College (NSW)
Mr Chris Lloyd	Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (NSW)
Ms Dorothy Lucardie	The Continuing Education Centre (Albury-Wodonga) (NSW)
Mr Malcolm MacIntosh	Manufacturing Learning SA
Ms Robyn Maher	Evening and Community Colleges Association (NSW)
Mr Michael McIntosh	Orana Regional Council of Adult and Community Education (NSW)
Ms June Millan	Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE (SA)
Mr Brian Milligan	Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Community College (NSW)
Ms Amanda Moore	Board of Adult and Community Education (NSW)
Mr Jim Nicholls	ACE North Coast (NSW)
Mr Peter O'Reilly	Eastern Suburbs Region Evening College (NSW)
Mr Max Pahlow	State Chamber of Commerce (NSW)
Ms Gai-Ellen Palmer	Western College of Adult Education (NSW)
Mr George Papallo	Macquarie Community College (NSW)
Ms Annie Payne	Yorke Peninsula Employment
Ms Maryanne Petersen	Automotive Training Board (NSW)
Mr Brenton Pilkington	Automotive Industry Training Board (SA)
Mr Richard Pinder	Workers' Educational Association Sydney (NSW)
Ms Sharon Pippas	Naracoorte Work Options (SA)
Ms Elaine Pittwood	Small Business Training Centre, Adelaide Institute of TAFE (SA)
Ms Cheryl Poulson	Hawkesbury Community College (NSW)
Mr Peter Poulson	The Parramatta College (NSW)
Mr Alan Ramsay	North Coast Regional Council of ACE (NSW)
Ms Sue Ross	Adult and Community Education Unit (SA)
Ms Cheryl Scopazzi	Australian Workers' Union (SA)
Ms Belinda Smith	Communications ITAB NSW (IT sector)
Ms Mairi Spedding	Eastwood Community Centre (SA)
Mr Les Stahl	NSW Community Services & Health ITAB
Mr Peter Tarren	Hunter Regional Council of Adult and Community Education (NSW)
Ms Sylvia Turner	Tuggerah Lakes Community Leisure Learning & Training Centre (NSW)
Ms Margaret Unwin	Central Coast Regional Council of Adult and Community Education (NSW)
Mr Dominic Vartuli	Strathfield Regional Community College (NSW)
Mr Mark Waters	SA Community Services and Health ITAB
Mr Grahame Wheatley	NSW Textile, Clothing and Footwear Training Board
Mr Eric Williams	Workers Educational Association Illawarra (NSW)
Ms Julia Williams	Midway Community House (SA)

Executive summary

Objectives

The study was primarily designed to investigate and report on linkages between adult community education (ACE) and mainstream vocational education and training (VET) which enable people to move between the two sectors in their pursuit of vocational learning. The two most important aspects of linkages studied were the state of existing linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET, and ways in which they might be improved or new ones developed. The focus was predominantly on linkages that enable people to move from ACE to mainstream VET rather than from mainstream VET to ACE.

In examining the linkages, the research also touched on a series of other important related issues including:

- ❖ the awareness of industry, the mainstream VET sector and the community of ACE and ACE VET
- ❖ the attitudes of industry, the mainstream VET sector and the community to ACE provision of vocational learning
- ❖ ways in which promotion of ACE VET and ACE VET–mainstream VET linkages might be developed or improved
- ❖ implications, both for ACE and mainstream VET, of increased vocational provision by the ACE sector
- ❖ directions ACE providers might consider in relation to future provision of vocational learning

Methodology

The evidence upon which this report is based comes from three main contributing groups in New South Wales (NSW) and South Australia (SA). The first comprised ACE administration, management and teaching personnel engaged in providing vocational learning together with a number of representatives of ACE peak bodies and associations. People from this group were referred to as ‘providers’. The second group comprised students undertaking ACE VET. The third group comprised industry representatives from employer associations, industry training advisory bodies (ITABs) and unions.

In all, 69 survey questionnaires were completed by ACE provider personnel (NSW: 43; SA: 23; not stated: 3); 383 questionnaires were completed by ACE students (NSW: 343; SA: 40) and a total of 68 interviews (NSW: 41; SA: 27) were conducted with personnel from industry and the ACE sector.

Key findings and suggestions

As well as presenting the key findings of this study, this summary also presents a series of suggestions for improvement to various aspects of ACE VET—suggestions relating to the nature and composition of ACE VET, how it is perceived, how it is promoted, pathways and linkages with mainstream VET, and working relationships between the ACE and mainstream VET. The suggestions are based on the survey results and the comments of project participants.

Strengths of ACE

There are many reasons why people choose to undertake vocational study with ACE rather than with mainstream VET. In some cases it may be because they do not possess the prerequisites for entry to a mainstream VET course, or because no places are available in the desired course. In others, it may be because ACE offers something special or different—something that distinguishes ACE VET from mainstream VET. Distinguishing features frequently identified by respondents in this study included the following:

- ❖ The ACE learning environment was informal and friendly, with a minimum of bureaucracy.
- ❖ ACE learning delivery was relaxed, supportive and less threatening, particularly for students who were apprehensive about study. Emphasis was on skills mastery rather than completion of courses in a set time.
- ❖ ACE had the capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of skills, needs and backgrounds.
- ❖ Being locally managed, ACE was generally better in touch with local needs of students and employers.
- ❖ Through its greater flexibility in timetabling, delivery modes and course content, ACE was better able to meet the needs of students and employers.
- ❖ In many instances, the tutor was responsible for the planning and development of a course as well as its delivery. This personal interest and ‘ownership’ of the course contributed to its quality.

These features were often perceived as the ‘strengths’ of ACE VET. ACE should strive to preserve and enhance them if it intends to extend and promote ACE VET.

Linkages and ACE–mainstream VET interaction

Established pathways supported by linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET are essential for students to reap maximum benefit from vocational study with ACE. They enable students to utilise their ACE learning as stepping stones to further study outside ACE. If credit or other recognition of ACE vocational study outside ACE is not available or difficult to obtain, the value and even the viability of ACE vocational study may be compromised. The following strategies, based on responses from providers, students and industry representatives in this study, are suggested as a means of developing or enhancing linkages between ACE and mainstream VET.

Develop and improve guidelines, definitions and procedures

Imprecise terminology and inconsistencies in procedures and their application in relation to ACE VET and its linkages with mainstream VET can reflect badly on the image of ACE and affect acceptance of ACE VET by industry and the mainstream VET sector. It is therefore suggested that ACE, in collaboration with mainstream VET, industry, students, and other parties concerned, should:

- ❖ clarify and standardise nationally the terminology used in connection with ACE VET including linkages and pathways
- ❖ develop and document guidelines and procedures to assist in the creation and accessing of linkages and pathways
- ❖ develop a register of existing pathways and linkages for the benefit of students and providers

Appoint designated linkage personnel

With increased provision of vocational learning by ACE there is increased potential for linking with mainstream VET. To capitalise on potential linkages for the benefit of students it is suggested that:

- ❖ designated personnel within ACE provider organisations be given responsibility and training to generally oversee linkages including: investigation and facilitation of their development; co-ordination and encouragement of provision of information to students on pathways and linkages; and provision of guidance on linkage issues to other teaching and administrative personnel
- ❖ consideration be given to the establishment of 'cluster co-ordinators' who would act on behalf of a cluster of providers in a region in facilitating development of linkages, disseminating information on linkages, and providing training and assistance to provider personnel in the implementation of procedures for accessing linkages

Provide training to ACE staff in pathways and linkages

Within ACE in particular, teachers provide assistance to students in completing many of the formalities involved in enrolling, undertaking and completing their courses. This assistance also applies to accessing pathways and linkages. Because it is important that the information and assistance provided by ACE staff to students be accurate and up to date, it is suggested that ACE staff likely to be involved in provision of information and assistance to students regarding pathways and linkages be given training in the procedures to be followed.

Provide training to ACE staff in industry standards and practices

Central to the success of pathways and linkages is acceptance by mainstream VET of ACE vocational training. To encourage this acceptance, ACE VET must conform to relevant training standards and ACE VET personnel need to have a sound understanding of industry and enterprise practices. It is therefore suggested that ACE VET personnel be given assistance and training, where needed, in: industry training standards, competency-based training, assessment design, teaching practices, understanding labour markets and working with enterprises.

Collaborate and co-operate with mainstream VET

Liaison between ACE and mainstream VET personnel can help to maximise the benefits obtainable from linkages. Close to three-quarters of providers and students consulted in this study saw a need for increased collaboration and co-operation between ACE and mainstream VET to improve linkages and co-ordination of vocational course provision across the two sectors. The following strategies, based on the responses and the ideas of project participants, are suggested to help achieve this:

- ❖ establish designated contact persons in ACE and mainstream VET organisations for the exchange of information on linkages and provision of assistance
- ❖ develop a combined ACE-mainstream VET peak body newsletter directed to providers in the two sectors focussing on co-operation and collaboration between the sectors and outlining changes and new developments relevant to pathways and linkages
- ❖ implement a system for prompt cross-sectoral exchange of new information on availability of vocational training which may have linkage potential, and the locations of providers through which it is offered
- ❖ conduct meetings, workshops and cross-sectoral visits between key ACE and mainstream VET personnel likely to be involved with linkages—the meetings to focus on exchange of information and development of ideas for pathways, linkages and other collaborative ventures

- ❖ arrange for mainstream VET lecturers to visit ACE centres to: meet ACE tutors; present an introductory technical and further education (TAFE) lesson to ACE students (to allay their fears about moving on to mainstream VET); and answer students' questions about linkages
- ❖ develop an 'active' referral system between ACE and mainstream VET which refers students automatically when needs cannot be met by one sector and an appropriate option exists in the other
- ❖ ACE and mainstream VET to investigate joint venture projects and funding where potential benefits exist
- ❖ co-locate ACE and TAFE providers on the same campus or in close proximity to each other where circumstances are appropriate

Structure ACE to complement mainstream VET

In their survey responses, providers and students were strongly in favour of ACE acting in a complementary role to mainstream VET—as opposed to a competitive role whereby it offered many of the same courses and outcomes. This perspective was based on the view that increased competitiveness could lead to: reduced co-operation from mainstream VET; changes to the special (and attractive) nature of ACE VET; and a reduction in traditional ACE management freedom, through becoming more dependent on government funding and more tightly bound by the needs of industry. To enhance ACE–mainstream VET complementarity ACE should:

- ❖ endeavour to maintain and enhance the distinctive and attractive styles of delivery which set ACE VET apart from mainstream VET
- ❖ increase the level of consultation between ACE and mainstream VET peak bodies regarding complementary vocational provision and linkages
- ❖ develop sharing of demographic information between ACE and mainstream VET so that demand can be more accurately determined and vocational provision can be planned to avoid duplication of effort and maximise options and other benefits for students
- ❖ provide vocational training in regional areas which mainstream VET finds difficult to service, either by acting as sole provider of particular courses, or by supervising training in the workplace, conducting assessments, providing tutoring and mentoring services, and assisting with distance learning as part of a partnership with mainstream VET
- ❖ act as a regional training broker and co-ordinator. While ACE may not always have the technical expertise or resources to teach a particular subject area, it does have the educational, organisational and entrepreneurial expertise to manage and co-ordinate learning, much of which can be in the workplace
- ❖ focus on provision of training in the workplace, an area some commentators felt mainstream VET (particularly TAFE) was not fully covering at present

Review and rationalise existing linkages, develop new ones

With many changes taking place in vocational training in recent times, and more to come, linkages between ACE VET, mainstream VET and industry training qualifications are in a state of flux. To ensure that linkages are kept up to date and new opportunities for linkages are not missed, ACE vocational learning provision should be mapped both against training packages and mainstream VET provision.

Promotion of ACE

Evidence from this study suggested that numerous individuals and organisations are disadvantaged by lack of information about the range of ACE VET available and the possibility of linking ACE vocational study with study in mainstream VET—potential vocational students of ACE may enrol with other providers in courses less suited to their

needs, or may even refrain from enrolling at all; employers may fail to take advantage of ACE vocational training which could better suit their needs; and information, advice and assistance about ACE VET will not be available through ITABs, employer bodies and unions if these bodies remain uninformed of the VET capabilities of ACE.

Lack of information about some aspects of ACE VET was also seen to extend to ACE staff—almost half of the ACE providers who participated in this study rated ACE staff knowledge of ACE–mainstream VET linkages as *poor* or *very poor*. And, looking outside ACE, ACE providers saw mainstream VET staff as being largely unaware of the scope of ACE provision and the existence of linkages.

If ACE VET is to be used more effectively, it is important that the extent and quality of ACE vocational information provision to potential students, industry and other educational sectors be improved. To help accomplish this the following strategies are suggested.

General ACE marketing strategies

- ❖ Employ professional marketing consultants to advise ACE national and State peak bodies on marketing strategies to help develop and promote ACE generally as a capable and respected provider of vocational learning.
- ❖ Provide professional training in marketing strategies for selected ACE provider personnel.
- ❖ Employ a suitable high profile person to act as a figurehead for ACE in promotional campaigns in order to provide ACE with a readily identifiable public image. This should be undertaken on a State or national basis and utilised by local providers.
- ❖ Use the ‘ACE’ acronym and/or the words ‘Adult and Community Education’ in all ACE provider organisation names and include them in all ACE VET publicity so that the vocational learning ACE provides is recognised as coming from ACE.
- ❖ Provide ACE personnel with ‘reader friendly’ newsletters and information sheets on ACE provision and linkages. Where appropriate these publications might also be sent to other interested parties, such as linkage contact personnel in mainstream VET.
- ❖ Use the Internet (which can be accessed by large numbers of potential students, employees, employers and industry organisations) as a promotional medium. However, in keeping with the nature of ACE, information should be presented in a manner that is easily accessed and understood.
- ❖ Develop linkage-specific information and support networks for ACE personnel directly concerned with pathways and linkages. (ACE peak bodies already perform a networking function as part of their general role; however, it is thought that personnel directly involved in linkages might benefit from linkage-specific networks of their own).
- ❖ Avoid inundating industry bodies (ITABs, employer associations, unions) with information from too many sources. Generally these bodies would prefer a single, State-wide consolidated source of information.
- ❖ Include business enterprise centres in any promotional activities. These organisations, provide assistance and advice for the development of small businesses and therefore should be kept aware of the training options available from ACE.
- ❖ Consider the possibility that ITABs might act as training brokers.

Field-based marketing strategies

- ❖ Maintain a local focus of ACE VET (one of the ‘strengths’ of ACE) by fostering direct contact between local ACE providers and local businesses.
- ❖ Where feasible, establish an ACE presence in mainstream VET information centres (for example, an ACE brochure display and/or an ACE contact person present at enrolment times) so that applicants for whom mainstream VET is unsuitable can be more easily informed of ACE as an alternative possibility.

- ❖ Take into account the nature of the business when promoting to employers: for a small business, the contact person is likely to be the proprietor who will not have a background in training, whereas for a large organisation, it is likely to be a training manager or someone else with training knowledge. Communication should be styled to match the recipient.
- ❖ Seek to have ACE providers represented on local business associations.
- ❖ Use local government, which can be a central source of information to its community, as an avenue of promotion to the general public.
- ❖ Inform local Centrelink agencies of ACE VET—to enable them to pass on information about ACE vocational provision to customers, particularly those in need of vocational learning but lacking the confidence and self-esteem to embark on mainstream study.

Content of promotional material

- ❖ Draw attention to relevant ‘strengths’ of ACE (for example, ACE being informal, non-bureaucratic, friendly, supportive, able to meet special needs and locally managed) in all promotion of ACE VET.
- ❖ Place emphasis on the quality of ACE programs and the experience and professionalism of teaching staff in any information directed to mainstream VET, in order to engender confidence in ACE program results for which linkages are sought.
- ❖ Promote ACE VET as a friendly and supportive alternative—features which favourably distinguish it from mainstream VET.
- ❖ Use case studies in promotions and information provision to potential students, mainstream VET, and industry, to demonstrate that ACE can deliver to industry standards and is well suited to meeting special needs of organisations and individuals.
- ❖ Avoid references to ‘soft skills’ (which can have connotations of low academic level, lack of importance, lack of substance and technical irrelevance, all of which can be unfavourable to the image of ACE VET).
- ❖ Promote pathways and linkages by developing and distributing information to students, prospective students, current students and industry, on the concept of pathways and linkages, the linkages available, and the means of accessing them.
- ❖ Focus promotion to unions on programs of relevance to union activities, such as occupational health and safety (OH&S), leadership, communication, negotiation and management, rather than technical skills.

Strategies to encourage mainstream VET awareness

Strategies which could encourage greater mainstream VET awareness of ACE VET can be found in the earlier section of this summary focussing on improving collaboration and co-operation between ACE and mainstream VET.

Future directions in ACE VET

To obtain guidance regarding future provision of ACE VET, the views of ACE providers, ACE students and industry representatives were sought regarding directions ACE VET should take. The following is a summary of their views.

Vocational areas

In order for ACE to link vocational learning with mainstream VET, it is important that it provides learning relevant to that offered by the mainstream providers. One obvious aspect of relevance must be the choice of subject area. If linkages are to occur, the choices available to students must provide scope for continuity from one sector to the other. ACE providers therefore need to ensure that ACE VET course content is compatible with that of mainstream

VET. In addition to ensuring compatible course content, ACE also needs to ensure that course delivery and assessment are of a standard acceptable to mainstream VET.

In the context of establishing linkages with mainstream VET, the following vocational areas were suggested as being particularly appropriate for provision by ACE:

- ❖ word processing, keyboarding and other computer-based skills
- ❖ entry-level training/introduction to VET
- ❖ management and office training
- ❖ information technology

Personal skills and attributes

Communication, report writing, negotiation, leadership, confidence, and other personal skills and attributes are highly valued by employers considering applicants for employment. They were also commonly cited as important components of ACE VET provision. Because, in the eyes of many respondents, these competencies do not feature strongly in mainstream VET, ACE should ensure that they continue to be incorporated in its vocational programs where applicable and where appropriate, are taught as separate programs in their own right.

Type of training

Any determination of future vocational provision by ACE needs to take into consideration the types of training it should offer. Results of this study suggest that ACE would be well suited to providing the following forms of training:

- ❖ training package-based VET
- ❖ segmented training (in which training is broken into short segments rather than being offered as a long course)
- ❖ flexible training
- ❖ customised training (including alternative styles of learning delivery to those normally available from mainstream VET)
- ❖ Internet-based training
- ❖ special provision for people facing changes in their work or redundancy as a result of industry changes
- ❖ training partnerships with enterprises
- ❖ provision of training assistance in the workplace
- ❖ AQF levels I and II (suggested as a niche market for ACE as the focus of TAFE moves to higher levels)

Mix of vocational and other learning

An issue which currently faces ACE providers is the extent to which they should move into vocational training. With limited budgets and the certainty that funding will not fully cover the demand for vocational provision, ACE providers need to strike a balance between their traditional 'non-vocational' general interest provision and that which is expressly vocational. As ACE providers move into VET there is a risk that some of the special characteristics of ACE which students and staff value so highly will be lost—ACE would become 'just another RTO' as one commentator put it. This possibility should not be overlooked in any determination of the relative proportions of vocational and other learning provided by ACE.

ACE management as a factor in pathways and linkages

The way in which ACE VET is managed has a bearing on how it is viewed by mainstream VET and industry which, in turn, can affect the provision of pathways and linkages between

the two sectors. In this context it is suggested that the strong local component of ACE management, generally regarded as one of the strengths of ACE, should be retained, and that ACE management perspectives should be broadened by inviting consultative input to ACE management committees from industry and the community.

Introduction

Background

Traditionally, adult and community education (ACE) learning has tended to focus on lifestyle, leisure, equity, and the provision of basic skills. In recent years this focus has been extended to include more vocationally oriented programs. This extension of ACE learning has also increased opportunities for people to move into learning, and from one type of learning to another. More importantly, it has increased the potential for individuals to make the transition from informal learning for leisure and self-improvement to more formal learning for vocational purposes. This aspect of ACE can be particularly beneficial to people who have limited experience of vocational learning, or who have not participated in vocational learning for lengthy periods of time, or have had past unhappy experiences in their learning. Introducing people to vocational learning through ACE also has the potential to encourage them to undertake vocational learning in mainstream vocational education and training (VET) (primarily represented by technical and further education [TAFE]), a step they may not have contemplated previously through lack of confidence in their ability to cope with vocational study. In providing these extended learning opportunities, ACE is not only acting as a stepping stone to mainstream VET, it is encouraging people to participate in lifelong learning.

Where subject matter that has been studied with ACE overlaps that offered by mainstream VET or can satisfy mainstream VET prerequisites for enrolment in a mainstream VET course, students may be given credit for their completed ACE study. This can take the form of direct credit (credit transfer), or credit may be awarded through processes known as recognition of prior learning (RPL) or recognition of current competencies (RCC). The arrangements through which students are given credit are generally referred to as linkages, and where linkages have been established by agreement between the two sectors, they can give rise to pathways which enable students to pursue predetermined study routes that embrace both sectors. It should be noted that linkages and pathways can also apply to movement in the opposite direction, that is from mainstream VET to ACE, or even between other educational sectors. However, this study will focus on linkages that enable people to move from ACE to mainstream VET.

To enable linkages between ACE and mainstream VET to work effectively there are several conditions which must be met: there must be awareness and acceptance of the concept of ACE VET by mainstream VET, by industry, and by the community, and there must be an effective system by which students may utilise the linkages.

This study investigates the following issues relating to awareness and acceptance of ACE VET and its linkage to mainstream VET:

- ❖ the attitudes of industry, the mainstream VET sector and the community, to ACE generally, and to the concept of ACE provision of vocational learning
- ❖ the attitudes of industry, the mainstream VET sector and the community, to the concept of linkages between ACE and mainstream VET which enable people to move between the two sectors in their pursuit of vocational learning
- ❖ the state of existing linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET
- ❖ ways in which existing linkages may be improved or new ones developed
- ❖ ways in which promotion of ACE VET and ACE VET–mainstream VET linkages might be developed or improved

- ❖ the present status of ACE mainstream VET interaction in relation to vocational learning and ways in which it might be improved
- ❖ the implications, both for ACE and mainstream VET, of increased vocational provision by the ACE sector
- ❖ the directions ACE providers might consider in relation to future provision of vocational learning

Methodology

General

There were three main contributing groups to this research:

- ❖ providers of ACE VET including administration, management and teaching personnel (this group also included several representatives of ACE peak bodies and associations)
- ❖ students undertaking ACE VET
- ❖ industry representatives and other interested parties, including employer associations, industry training bodies and unions

The views of providers were obtained primarily by survey questionnaires, and interviews (in person and by telephone). In all, 69 provider personnel completed the survey questionnaires: 43 from New South Wales (NSW), 23 from South Australia (SA) and three who did not indicate the State in which they were employed.

The views of ACE students were also obtained by survey questionnaires. Completed questionnaires were received from 343 students in NSW and 40 in SA.

Information from the third group (industry representatives and other interested parties) was obtained through 68 interviews. These interviews were conducted either by visit or telephone, or a combination of both.

In summary, the information on which the project results are based was derived from 69 survey questionnaires completed by ACE provider personnel, 383 questionnaires completed by ACE students and a total of 68 interviews conducted with personnel from industry and the ACE sector.

ACE, mainstream VET and linkages defined

ACE and mainstream VET

One of the aims of this research was to look at the linkages between vocationally oriented learning provided by ACE and that provided by the established VET system. The original rationale for this research was that there would be distinct differences, both in delivery and content, between the two. In fact, the picture that emerged was not as straightforward—while there were differences, there were also similarities. In NSW, for example, it was found there were large ACE colleges which, for some years, had been providing VET programs similar to those available through a TAFE institute. In regard to VET provision therefore, these ACE colleges might be categorised as part of the established VET system. On the other hand, there were also TAFE institutes in SA providing ACE, which in a sense made them part of the ACE system. To further complicate the issue, providers on both sides were offering both accredited and non-accredited vocational programs.

For the purpose of this report the terms ‘ACE VET’ and ‘mainstream VET’ have been adopted to distinguish between the two streams of VET across which the linkages are deemed to operate. ACE VET is vocational learning (accredited or non-accredited) provided by an organisation set up to deliver adult and community education, and which is not primarily dependent on public funding. Mainstream VET covers accredited VET programs delivered by the traditional providers of VET such as TAFE institutions, large employers and some private providers. ACE providers that deliver significant amounts of VET were not considered to be

mainstream VET because, although the content and outcomes of the VET programs they deliver can be similar to those of the mainstream providers, the natures of their organisations and program deliveries are different.

Linkages

The linkages which were the focus of this research were those between the categories of provider just mentioned. That is, linkages by which credit or recognition for learning achieved through ACE VET enabled a person to move to mainstream VET.

Although linkages can also be defined in terms of movement between *non-accredited* and *accredited* VET, that was not a criterion used in this research. It should be noted, however, that movement between non-accredited and accredited VET was often a component of the linkages studied, and furthermore, was frequently the reason people sought to link their vocational studies.

Persons and organisations consulted

In conducting this research a wide cross-section of individuals and organisations in both NSW and SA was consulted. They included:

- ❖ executive staff, teaching staff and students in:
 - ACE colleges
 - evening colleges
 - community houses
 - community centres
 - neighbourhood houses
 - TAFE-based ACE providers
 - worker education associations
 - private providers of ACE VET
- ❖ ACE State administrative/co-ordinating bodies
- ❖ ACE regional councils
- ❖ employer associations
- ❖ industry training advisory bodies (ITABs)
- ❖ unions

Responses to survey questionnaires

In survey questions in which a set list of items was provided for ratings or comments, respondents were invited to add further items. Generally, only a few did this. Unless the additional items were mentioned by several respondents or were judged to be of high relevance they were not reported.

In some cases responses involving ratings are ranked for reporting purposes by combining the two highest percentage ratings at one end of the scale. In such cases the percentages progressively increased across the scale. Where there were any significant anomalies (for example, polarisation of the responses at each end of the scale), this was reported.

Many of the comments reported are only stated by a few respondents. Where there are numerous comments of the same nature, this is generally pointed out in the report.

Frequencies and percentages reported for the provider and student survey questionnaire responses are for NSW and SA combined except where noted otherwise.

Percentages in tables may not always total exactly 100% due to rounding error.

Gratitude is extended to all project participants who completed the survey questionnaires. The questionnaires were extensive (56 questions in the provider questionnaire and 36 in the student version) and required considerable time and thought to complete (as some respondents confirmed with some frankness in their additional comments). The fact that the providers and students were willing to put themselves to so much trouble is indicative of the degree of enthusiasm (one could even say passion) in their regard for ACE and confirms the high standing of ACE in the eyes of its constituents.

Reporting of interview responses

The information gained from interviews has been analysed and categorised under various headings relevant to the aims of the project. Some of it is reported in the form of compilations of comments from respondents.

To preserve confidentiality but still indicate the background of the respondent, the provider of each response has been identified by a tag indicating the role of the respondent and the State in which he or she works. Some responses and comments have been paraphrased to make them more readable.

There is some duplication of comments in different sections because they are applicable in more than one section.

The overall tone of the interviews conducted for this report was one of openness and an underlying desire to see ACE and mainstream VET working together harmoniously. Because of this, the comments of interviewees were often quite frank and sometimes critical of some aspects of ACE–mainstream VET interaction. These comments have not been edited because to do so would detract from the impact and importance the interviewee wished to attach to an issue. However, it must be pointed out that the critical comments were invariably only a small proportion of all the views aired in an interview, and it was apparent they were delivered with the intention of raising issues in the hope that their resolution would benefit ACE–mainstream VET interaction. It would be most unfair, therefore, to allow these criticisms to imply that antagonism existed between ACE and mainstream VET. It did not.

The respondents

A total of 117 providers, 389 students and 21 representatives from industry provided information for this study.

Providers

Of the 386 provider questionnaires that were sent out, 306 were to NSW and 80 were to SA. The recipients of the questionnaires were: representatives from ACE administrative/co-ordinating bodies, ACE provider associations and similar bodies, ACE regional officers, and directors, principals, managers, education officers, co-ordinators and teaching staff within ACE provider institutions. Distribution of the questionnaires within the ACE provider institutions was at the discretion of the initial contact person (most often the director, principal or manager) in accordance with a set of guidelines accompanying the questionnaires. Responses were entirely voluntary. A pre-addressed reply-paid envelope was provided with each questionnaire for return of the completed form.

In all, 69 questionnaires were returned in time for inclusion in the data, 43 from NSW and 23 from SA giving response rates of 14% and 29% respectively. Three in which respondents did not identify their State were also received. One additional questionnaire was returned too late to be included in the numerical data, making an overall total of 70. Where relevant, the suggestions and comments from this additional return (which was from SA) have been incorporated into the report. Respondents identified 38 separate organisations.

For convenience in reporting and discussion, all respondents from provider organisations have been referred to as 'providers'.

Provider questionnaire respondents were predominantly teachers, course co-ordinators and managers as detailed in table 1.

Table 1: Positions held by ACE provider questionnaire respondents

Positions of ACE provider personnel responding to questionnaire	Number
Principal/executive officer/manager	12
Program co-ordinator/course director/education officer	16
Tutor/trainer/teacher/educator/lecturer	28
ACE regional council officer	3
ACE association/advisory body representatives	2
Other (not clear)	1

Based on postcodes and other information provided, the geographical locations of all but nine of the provider respondents were determined and allocated to three broad categories: *Capital city*; *Other metropolitan* (an ABS designation used for urban centres, other than capital cities, with populations in excess of 100 000, such as Newcastle or Wollongong) and *Rural or remote*.

The results are summarised in table 2.

Table 2: Geographic locations of providers

Region	NSW	SA	Total
Capital city	22	22	44
Other metropolitan*	3	0	3
Rural or remote	12	1	13
Total	37	23	60

* Urban centres with populations greater than 100 000 (e.g. Newcastle, Wollongong)

Providers responding to the questionnaire were asked to indicate the primary nature of their organisation. As shown in table 3, almost all (89%) of the 64 who did so saw their organisation primarily as an adult community education provider.

Table 3: Primary nature of provider respondent's organisation

Primary nature of organisation	% (of 64 responses)
Adult community education provider	89
Government funded vocational provider	5
Non-government vocational provider	5
Provider of non-accredited vocational education	2

Providers indicated that ACE continues to offer its traditional programs (general interest programs) along with a growing number of accredited and non-accredited vocational programs. Table 4 summarises their responses.

Table 4: Types of learning offered

Type of learning	% (of 202 responses)
General non-vocational (e.g. Internet for seniors, amateur astronomy, public speaking, aromatherapy).	27
Basic skills (e.g. English as a second language, literacy, numeracy, communication).	27
Non-accredited vocationally oriented learning (e.g. keyboard skills, small business operation, food preparation for invalids).	25
Accredited vocational learning (e.g. first aid, bookkeeping, airline ticketing, supervision, hairdressing, pastry cook, electrical mechanic).	21

In addition to the providers surveyed by questionnaire, a further 47 providers and other ACE personnel representing 42 separate provider organisations were interviewed. Details of the backgrounds of the interviewees are summarised in table 5.

Table 5: Details of ACE personnel interviewed

ACE personnel interviewed	
ACE administration representatives (NSW: 4, SA: 1)	5
ACE association representatives (NSW)	1
ACE principals, managers, co-ordinators, education officers (NSW: 19, SA: 14)	33
ACE regional council officers (NSW)	5
WEA executive representatives (NSW: 2, SA: 1)	3

Industry representatives

A total of 21 representatives from industry including employer associations, unions, and ITABs were also interviewed. Details of the backgrounds of these interviewees are summarised in table 6.

Table 6: Details of industry representatives interviewed

Industry representatives interviewed	
Employer association representatives (NSW: 2, SA: 1)	3
ITAB executive representatives & officers (NSW: 6, SA: 7)	13
Union representatives (NSW: 2, SA: 3)	5

Students

A total of 2616 student questionnaires were sent out; 2040 to NSW and 576 to SA. Responses were voluntary. A total of 383 students returned completed questionnaires, 343 from NSW and 40 from SA giving response rates of 17% and 7% respectively.

A further six questionnaires were returned too late to be included in the numerical data, one from NSW and five from SA. Where relevant, the suggestions and comments from these additional returns have been incorporated into the report.

Overall, female student respondents outnumbered males by a ratio of 3:1 (73% female). In SA, the disparity was even greater with a ratio of 9:1 (90% female).

Although the SA sample was relatively small, the higher disparity would appear to support the view that the smaller neighbourhood houses which appear to exist in greater proportion in SA (in comparison with the larger 'college' type organisations more often found in NSW) may offer more personal enrichment programs and vocational programs likely to be sought by female students.

Several ACE providers noted that vocational courses tended to attract a more even gender balance.

Our figures would be about 70% female to 30% male overall. However, the figures would be more like 55% female to 45% male for vocational education. (ACE principal, NSW)

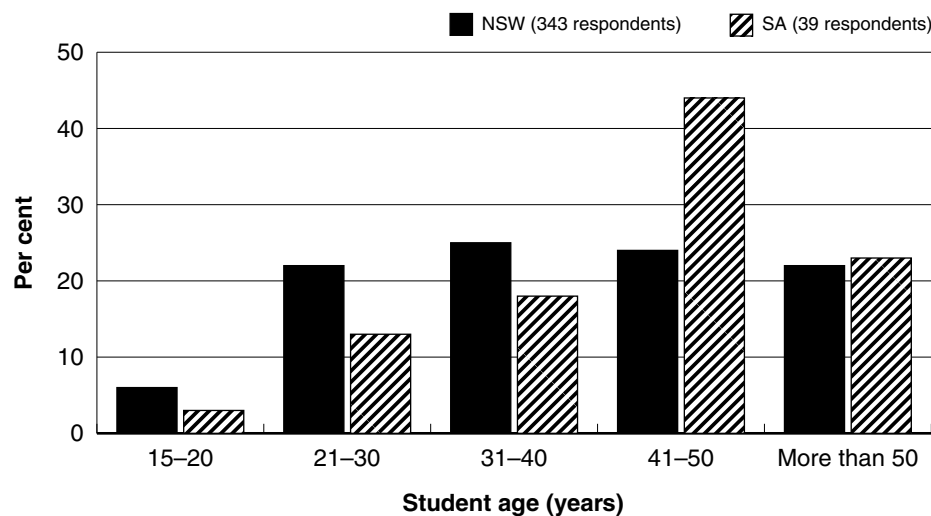
Ages of student respondents were categorised into five ranges as specified in figure 1. In NSW, the upper four ranges contained a relatively even distribution of respondents, with between 22% and 25% in each age range. The SA sample, although small (39 respondents), was skewed towards higher ages with 44% in the 41–50 years range. In both States there were significantly fewer in the lowest age range (15–20 years). The strong representation of upper age groups in the sample (overall, almost 50% over 40 years of age and more than 70% over 30 years) reflects the important role ACE is playing in facilitating lifelong learning for mature-age people.

About 95% of respondents to the student questionnaire spoke English in their homes. Eighteen of the 21 respondents who did not normally speak English in their home specified the language spoken. Of the languages specified, eight were Asian, six were European and four were Middle Eastern.

Only a very small proportion of students (0.8% of 387 responses) indicated they were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) descent.

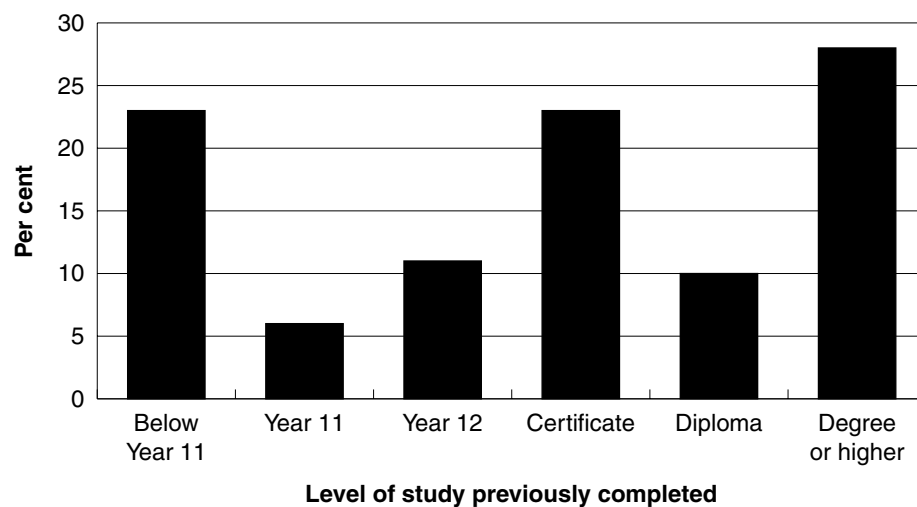
A small proportion of students (6.5% of 387 responses) indicated they had a disability which might affect their ability to work.

Figure 1: Age ranges of student respondents



The highest level of previously completed study was reported by 383 students. The three most commonly indicated levels were: *Degree or higher*, *Certificate*, and *Below Year 11*. All results are summarised in figure 2. The reasons for the relatively low percentages for *Year 11*, *Year 12* and *Diploma* and hence inconsistent trends across the levels, are not known.

Figure 2: Highest level of study completed



Just on two-fifths (39%) of the sample of 383 students indicated they had previously studied at an ACE-type organisation (such as an adult community education centre, neighbourhood house, or Workers' Education Association [WEA]) and a similar proportion (42%) indicated a TAFE institution or similar mainstream VET provider. Some students indicated they had studied in both types of organisation.

Of the 380 students who indicated their employment status, just under three-quarters (71%) said they were currently employed. Of those who were currently employed, over eight out of ten (82%) were working at least 15 hours per week, and of those not currently employed, almost nine out of ten (87%) said they previously had regular employment.

These responses suggest that ACE is catering primarily for people who have had experience of employment.

Students who were currently employed were invited to state their occupation. The extensive range of occupations stated by the 240 who did so was indicative of the breadth of the community ACE serves. A sample of the occupations is given in table 7.

Table 7: Sample of occupations stated by student respondents

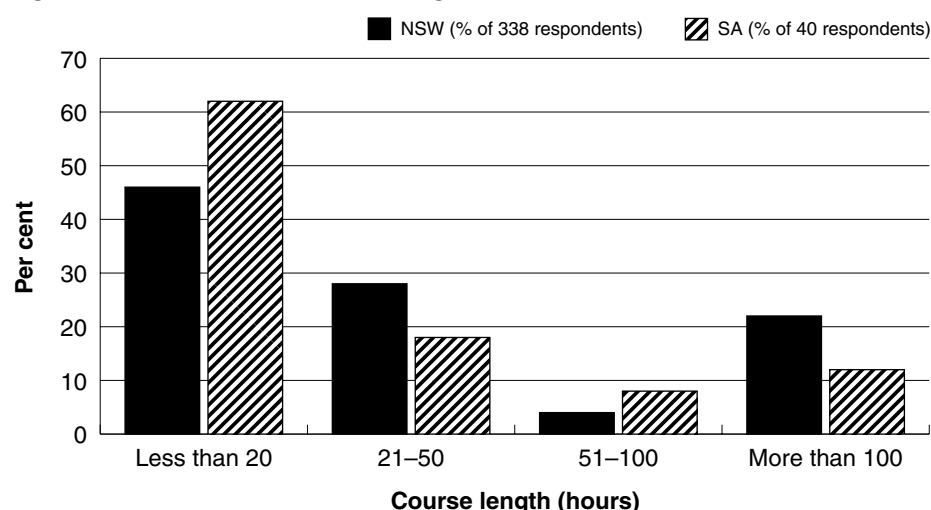
adventure trainer	doctor	lawyer	photographer
bank officer	editor	manager (labour hire)	security officer
chef	factory worker	metallurgist	shipwright
cleaner	horticulturalist	midwife	truck driver
correctional officer	IT consultant	nurse	wine consultant

Just over two-thirds of students (67%) were currently undertaking the ACE program upon which they were basing their answers. The remainder had completed it.

Almost all (99%) of the students surveyed studied by attending classes. However, this figure should not be taken to imply that only 1% of ACE vocational students study by alternative means, such as distance education. Because almost all of the questionnaires were distributed to students by provider staff, it is probable they went to students attending classes because they were most easily accessible.

Overall, nearly half of the students in the survey indicated the length of their course was less than 20 hours and about another quarter indicated 21 to 50 hours. Figure 3 shows the patterns of responses for NSW and SA.

Figure 3: Student indications of length of course



Although the reason for the very low percentage of students undertaking courses of 51–100 hours duration could not be determined, it is likely that it reflects a gap which exists between the modules or ‘short courses’ (commonly ranging from 15 to 30 hours in length) often undertaken by ACE students, and whole courses (often of the order of 200 hours and comprising a series of modules). One commentator from NSW suggested that the 51–100 hour courses could be literacy tuition, which commonly fell within the 80–100 hour range. However, this could not be easily verified.

When asked if the ACE provider of their course was a registered provider of VET, a considerable proportion of students said they were *Not sure* (NSW: 41%, SA: 63%). Of those who felt able to answer the question, 90% in NSW and 50% in SA said their provider was registered. Although the differences between the two States should be treated with caution because the sample for SA was small (38 respondents), these results support the view that vocational emphasis in ACE tends to be stronger in NSW than in SA.

The geographical locations of the student survey respondents were also determined according to postcodes and allocated to three broad categories: *Capital city*; *Other metropolitan* and *Rural or remote*. All but seven of the student respondents could be categorised in this way. The results are summarised in table 8.

Table 8: Geographic locations of students

Region	NSW	SA	Total
Capital city	257	38	295
Other metropolitan*	37	0	37
Rural or remote	48	2	50
Total	342	40	382

* Urban centres with populations greater than 100 000 (e.g. Newcastle, Wollongong)

The ACE sector

This study focusses on ACE VET in NSW and SA. The following is a brief outline of the relevant ACE features in each State.

ACE in New South Wales

ACE providers in NSW can be categorised into three groups: evening and community colleges (23 providers), community and adult education centres (43 providers) and workers' education associations (3 providers). At the time this research was undertaken, these three groups were each represented by their own peak body. It was understood, however, that on 25 May 2000, these individual peak bodies were to be replaced by a single body to be known as the Adult and Community Education Council of NSW.

All of these providers are community-owned and managed organisations supported by the NSW Board of Adult and Community Education (BACE). They are largely self-funded, although government funding is provided through BACE for some programs. In the case of a few providers, the amount of government funding is quite large (in the region of \$450 000 per year for one ACE college out of a total budget of \$2 000 000).

In NSW, ACE providers are serviced by nine regional councils of ACE whose role is to promote and support ACE, facilitate liaison between ACE providers, and assist BACE in the implementation of policies and priorities.

As well as offering non-accredited learning, many ACE providers are registered training organisations (RTOs), able to provide accredited vocational education and training.

Although TAFE colleges provide some learning which is similar to, and can overlap ACE (such as Outreach programs and TAFE Plus), they are not generally regarded as ACE providers.

For the purposes of this research, representatives of BACE, regional councils and all three categories of ACE provider were consulted.

ACE in South Australia

In SA there were 103 ACE providers receiving funding through the Adult and Community Education Unit in SA. These providers operated under a variety of titles, the most common being community centres and neighbourhood houses. As in NSW, the Workers' Educational Association was also regarded as a provider of ACE.

Unlike NSW, some TAFE institutes in SA provided ACE in addition to their normal vocational provision. In some cases, the ACE programs were provided by a separate unit which operated relatively independently of normal VET provision; in others the ACE programs were provided within the normal institute structure (for example, by a School of Business Studies). The ACE programs were essentially self-funding.

By comparison with NSW, ACE provision in SA appeared to be much more localised and less oriented towards vocational provision.

In SA, representatives of the SA Adult and Community Education Unit, community centres, neighbourhood houses, WEA, and ACE providers associated with TAFE institutes were consulted for this research.

ACE VET provision

To many people, ACE learning can be simply summed up as comprising highly focussed programs, often short in length, aimed at providing learners with the desired knowledge and skills in a friendly, supportive environment.

Within an ACE class it is not uncommon to find people from a diverse range of backgrounds undertaking study for equally diverse reasons. Some may be undertaking their course as a hobby, some just to learn something of interest, some to test whether they can cope with study before embarking on something more ambitious, some because it may be an avenue to employment, and some because they need the skills for their work or to run a business.

There is also an increasing likelihood that, amongst these people, there may be some who will subsequently obtain credit or some other form of recognition from mainstream VET for their ACE learning and so use it as a stepping stone to further study outside the ACE sector.

With comparatively few students in the 15 to 20-year-age group, ACE students, as a whole, tend to be older than their counterparts in mainstream VET—an indication, perhaps, of the significant contribution ACE makes to lifelong learning for mature-age students.

Whether or not ACE learning is vocational is a contentious issue. In the case of mainstream VET the answer is clear—people almost invariably undertake studies with mainstream VET organisations because they need the knowledge and skills for the work they do—or plan to do. For ACE, the answer is not nearly as clear. A large proportion of the ACE learning offered under various labels such as *general interest, leisure, pleasure, enrichment or personal development* can have application in the world of work. Many people undertake these courses intending to use the knowledge and skills gained in their work; others subsequently find they can do so. The following comments illustrate how ACE learning, whether expressly vocational or not, can be applied vocationally.

When the college put Feng Shui on they felt it was questionable whether it had value as a subject. They put it on because the trainer had such impressive credentials as an architect and was an expert in the area in general and it looked as though it could be a quality presentation. We found the people enrolling in it were estate agents, builders, surveyors—people in the building industry. They were looking at improving their capabilities with people for whom Feng Shui was important. So although it was not a vocational program as such, people were enrolling in it for vocational motives—to expand their business opportunity. We are finding that although a program is not vocational, it can sometimes be full of people who are doing it for vocational reasons. In our massage courses, half the people doing it are in it for vocational reasons. (ACE principal, NSW)

I've personally taught cake decorating for many years in an ACE program and I would say that almost 100% of those people enter the program with no vocational intent at all. After about two terms 90% of them have a vocational intent. A lot of that is just cottage industry, but others go on to business studies where they do business skills in how to set up their businesses, or they go into hospitality courses, or they might go and work for a shop that does cake decorating, or go and work for Coles and Woolworths in their bakery sections. (ACE education officer, SA)

There were numerous other examples cited, such as floral art being undertaken by occupational therapists for their work with patients, ACE massage courses leading on to certificate level study, and public-speaking or presentation techniques contributing to skills as a workplace trainer.

Some suggested that whether or not a course was vocational hinged on the intent of the learner—if the learner intended to use the knowledge and skills vocationally, then it was

vocational learning. As noted earlier, vocational intent of a student can even develop during a course, which further complicates the issue.

Others saw courses resulting in personal development, such as increased assertiveness and confidence, negotiation skills, and leadership as being vocational. An employer association representative, for instance, saw vocational merit from a broad perspective, saying that even ballroom dancing could provide vocational benefits:

... even ballroom dancing [could have vocational benefits], it's all relevant to the development of the individual, the development of the individual's perspective on life, their confidence, the way they view things, even their ability to understand themselves—these things are relevant to how they perform in any job.

(Employer association representative, SA)

Whether or not a course is deemed vocational also has GST implications. For taxation reasons, ACE providers need to establish at the outset what type of course it is if they are to avoid complications with fees.

Language and literacy in ACE

ACE has long been a provider of language and literacy learning. Not only does this learning assist people to cope with the demands of everyday life in our society, it can also enable them to meet the requirements of the work they perform. Indeed ACE recognises this and often tailors the program to meet work-related needs. In this latter sense, even non-accredited programs provide vocational learning.

Perceptions of ACE vocational programs

Important to the success of ACE VET is how it is viewed—by the students who hope to be able to use the knowledge and skills learned, by industry which needs to see benefits from employing ACE graduates, by mainstream VET with which ACE seeks to link, and by the ACE sector which needs to be satisfied that ACE VET is in the interests of ACE and its students. The following summary of the views of participants in this project gives insight to some of the issues involved.

As mentioned previously, one of the characteristics often found in ACE VET is that it consists of short, focussed courses designed to meet particular needs of students and industry. As one ACE representative put it: '... what ACE is doing is taking a certificate [accredited] course and breaking it into short courses [modularising it] with statements of attainment available'. In some cases, the statements of attainment are sufficient to meet the needs of the students and employers, particularly in small business and regional areas.

TAFE, too, is now providing VET in a format which, in some respects, is similar to that of ACE—short courses, highly focussed on the needs of the student and the employer. In NSW this is offered under the banner of 'TAFE Plus'. NSW TAFE sees this as being different from ACE VET in that it focusses on large businesses and organisations as opposed to a stronger ACE focus on small and local businesses. In SA, too, there are TAFE-based providers offering 'ACE'-type learning. However, they see themselves more as ACE providers operating in association with TAFE, with their offerings being similar to that of other ACE providers. In both cases, being TAFE-based providers, they theoretically have access to the resources of the TAFE corporate system. In practice, however, this can be restricted by competing demands for facilities from mainstream TAFE. One of the TAFE institute-based ACE providers in SA also noted that, because their students were in the same building as the mainstream VET providers, and they had many lecturers who taught across both sectors and taught with a view to linkages, the students were better positioned to take advantage of linkages and were less likely to be intimidated by the prospect of moving on to TAFE.

Strengths of ACE VET

Many of the features that make ACE VET different from mainstream VET are regarded as its 'strengths'. They are often reasons why people choose to study with ACE. Identification and rating of these strengths was used as an indirect means of determining people's perception of the most important advantages of ACE provision.

Provider ratings of strengths

Providers were given a list of ten features of ACE VET commonly referred to as strengths and asked to rate the significance of each in distinguishing ACE VET from mainstream VET. The findings indicated that almost all (96%) of the providers saw an informal, friendly and non-threatening environment as the most important feature of ACE VET. Other highly rated features (all chosen by over 80%) were, a capacity to serve students from wide-ranging backgrounds, a capacity to meet special student and employer needs, the helpful attitudes of teaching personnel, a minimum of bureaucracy, and emphasis on skills mastery rather than course deadlines. Full details of these and other results are provided in table 9.

Table 9: Provider ratings of 'strengths' of ACE VET

Feature nominated as a 'strength' of ACE VET	% of providers rating as <i>Extremely significant or Very significant</i>
Informal, friendly, non-threatening environment	96
Capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of needs, skills and backgrounds	86
Able to respond to special needs of individual students and employers	86
The trainer is a helper rather than a learning authority	86
Minimum of bureaucracy	85
Emphasis on mastering skills and knowledge rather than completing course in a set time	83
Often locally managed	76
Students may enter and leave learning programs easily	74
Able to provide wide range of teaching formats	74
Good physical accessibility	65

Student ratings of strengths

For comparison, students were asked to rate how important the same ten features were as 'strengths' of ACE vocational study. Here, again, an informal, friendly and non-threatening environment was chosen as the most important feature. Like the providers most of the features were chosen by over 80% of respondents. Full details of the results are provided in table 10.

The only notable difference between the responses of the students and providers was that students ranked the item *Able to provide wide range of teaching formats* more highly than did providers. It should be encouraging for ACE providers to see that their focus on provision of informal, friendly, non-threatening environments for learning is recognised and highly valued by the students. ACE would be well advised to maintain and promote this feature of its vocational learning provision.

Table 10: Student ratings of ‘strengths’ of ACE VET

Feature nominated as a ‘strength’ of ACE VET	% of students rating as <i>Extremely important or Important</i>
Informal, friendly, non-threatening environment	88
Emphasis on mastering skills and knowledge rather than course completion in set time	83
Able to provide wide range of teaching formats	82
Trainer is a helper rather than a learning authority	82
Able to respond to special needs of individual students and employers	81
Capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of skill needs and backgrounds	80
Good physical accessibility	80
Minimum of bureaucracy	77
Students may enter and leave learning programs easily	72
Often locally managed	70

The magnitude of the percentages confirms the perceptions of these features as strengths (and hence advantages) of ACE. If, as the question proposed, these are the features which distinguish ACE from mainstream VET, then it would be wise for ACE providers to ensure that they are not weakened or lost. Elsewhere in this report it is noted that, on occasions, ACE providers express concern that they may become ‘just another RTO’ as they move further into provision of accredited vocational education. Maintaining, and even enhancing, ACE’s strengths is one way of lessening the likelihood of this occurring. Indeed, if ACE providers wish to increase their provision of vocational learning as a service to the community, they might well consider capitalising on these features by enhancing and promoting them in association with their vocational learning programs.

Comments on strengths of ACE VET

In order to present a more comprehensive picture of the strengths of ACE VET, points made by providers and industry representatives about some of the highly ranked features are discussed below.

Flexibility in delivery

Many of the strengths identified by students in tables 9 and 10 relate in various ways to what can be generally termed the *flexibility* of ACE VET. One of the aspects of flexibility which is said to make ACE learning provision preferred over mainstream VET is its ability to cater for the needs of students who find it difficult to integrate their studies with other commitments. Some providers indicated that ACE was well positioned to provide flexibility in delivery of vocational learning because, through the use of sessional employees instead of permanent teaching staff, they were able to select teachers who could teach in evenings, on weekends, through holiday periods, and in a variety of locations. In addition, ACE provider organisations were more widely dispersed through the community and therefore often geographically closer to the location where the training was required. The following comments from a NSW principal illustrate the flexible approach ACE has to vocational provision:

We were rung up on a Friday and asked if we could start a typing course on the following Tuesday to get a group of armed services personnel up to 30 words per minute in seven days. It was a totally focussed course—they had to do it. It was against all normal adult learning principles, but was

entirely appropriate for that group. So we had one typing course for these people and the usual softer approach for other students.

and a later remark:

... you are unlikely to find many small business managers allowing an employee a day off each week. In such cases, the one thing ACE can, and does, do well is to use its flexibility to put courses on, say, on a weekend, or in the evening. We'd run them at midnight if we had to.

(ACE principal, NSW)

When providers and students were asked in their questionnaires to compare the flexibility of ACE study with that of mainstream VET, around three-quarters of them (78% and 74% respectively) rated ACE either as *more flexible* or *much more flexible* than mainstream VET. Only very small proportions selected either *less flexible* or *much less flexible* the other end of the scale (providers 2%, students 0.4%)

Flexibility, it would seem, is a distinguishing feature of ACE VET worthy of preservation and promotion. This was confirmed when 95% of providers, in answer to another question, indicated it should be extended and promoted as a benefit of ACE learning provision.

Ability to meet individual and workplace needs

Many people feel that ACE, because of its close association with local communities, businesses and students, is in closer touch with vocational needs than mainstream VET organisations. ACE, with its wide coverage of metropolitan and regional areas, can also act as a conduit through which vocational education can be provided to small businesses and small country towns.

In ACE, the trainer also usually deals directly with the workplace, determining requirements, designing the training program and teaching it, thus helping to ensure that the training accurately matches workplace requirements. With the advent of training packages, this is seen as a particularly valuable asset. Being able to attract and draw on part-time teachers and trainers from a wide range of backgrounds, ACE is in a strong position to select appropriate people for the task.

Relaxed and supportive learning environments

Students, providers and industry were fulsome in their praise of the informal, friendly and supportive nature of ACE. Indeed, the success of ACE as a provider of vocational learning is due in no small part to the fact that it is perceived as being less intimidating than mainstream VET organisations. People feel more comfortable studying with ACE, particularly those who, for one reason or another, are apprehensive about study or need ongoing reassurance and support. This feature can be especially important to people who are returning to study because of job changes or loss of employment.

In this context, one ACE principal made the interesting observation that: ACE, 'because of its philosophy, attracts teachers who see their role as being beyond merely delivering the required competencies. The way they deal with students is more nurturing, which is important because of the type of student who comes to ACE'.

The following comments also illustrate how importantly this feature of ACE VET is viewed.

The primary catchment area for [our] centre is a low socio-economic level. Students are apprehensive about going to a TAFE institution. The TAFE campus is like an ivory tower to them and they wouldn't go within cooee of it. ACE enables them to be influenced to do so in a roundabout way. [However,] we have to be careful to introduce the objective of moving from ACE to TAFE very slowly. We're basically teaching people not to be frightened of life.

(ACE Manager, SA)

[ACE] encourages people to have a go. And I think that's really important—we can't lose that. It's the first port of call for some who have never been back to school or pursued any education.
(Union representative, SA)

If ACE wishes to promote its vocational provision, it should ensure that it capitalises on the above-mentioned features which so strongly set it apart from many other mainstream vocational providers.

Nature and quality of courses

People find ACE courses attractive for a variety of reasons. They like the care with which they are put together and the easygoing style of teaching. Students, employers and other industry people all liked the focussed nature of the course content, which in turn helped make the courses relevant and to the point. 'Short', 'sharp', 'snappy', and 'punchy' were words commonly used in describing ACE vocational courses. An ACE association representative also drew attention to the benefit arising from a tutor's involvement in designing and setting up a course: 'One of the things students most like about ACE is the tutors and their style of teaching. The thing that makes these people unique and gives added value to the organisation is the way they put their courses together. In a sense, it's [the tutor's] course and it has an identity to it. We don't want to strip this away. Many tutors would have a sense of propriety about their courses'.

Coming from a background of 'soft' general interest courses, ACE has done well in recent years to develop a reputation for quality in its vocational provision. If it wishes to enhance its future role as a provider of vocational learning it must continue striving to improve the consistency and quality of its courses while maintaining its highly regarded student-centred, needs-focussed approach. However, ACE must also be particularly vigilant in ensuring its courses meet industry standards and are ethically used. The following comment from a union highlights the potential danger for ACE in this regard:

[ACE could be perceived by employers as] cheap, quick, and largely uncredentialed. [Employers] can get away with murder with it and that's why I am really unsure about the role of ACE.
(Union representative, NSW)

Criticisms of ACE VET

Not all industry representatives were confident that ACE had the ability to provide vocational education of an adequate standard for their industry sector, as the following comments from ITABs indicate:

The problem we would have with the ACE sector in regard to formal training is the capacity of the ACE sector to develop or deliver vocationally relevant training. I do not have a great deal of confidence in the ACE sector being able to harness the expertise and qualifications required for that delivery.
(ITAB executive representative, SA)

I would be worried about ACE muddying the water in a sense. We already have enough trouble explaining [to industry] national accreditation of courses and the use of registered training providers and all of the paraphernalia around the national training system. If ACE then bundles in with look-alike course offerings then it just adds confusion—we already have providers who are not registered offering courses all over the country ... I think there are many people in the community organisations who could fill [training] gaps that are not being effectively filled by self-employed training providers. However the dangers are that the stuff they deliver may not be of a contemporary nature or of a high enough standard in terms of what would be available through an accredited program.
(ITAB executive representative, SA)

One ACE principal cautioned against expecting too much from interaction between ACE and ITABs saying that ITABs only have limited resources and it would be unfair to expect them to

provide much in the way of resources to assist in implementation of ACE vocational training programs.

Finally, several union spokespersons commented on concerns the unions had about the effect ACE training might have on employees' wages. The concerns centred on the possibility that, by undertaking ACE training, employees might qualify for a lower-level award and so fail to gain pay rates to which they could otherwise be entitled. It was suggested that in some cases an employee's wages might even be reduced.

In this context, linking ACE VET to mainstream VET and the establishment of pathways could help to reduce the likelihood of wages being affected in several ways—by facilitating formal recognition of the level of particular ACE programs and by showing how the programs fit in to the overall qualifications structure and how progression can occur via ACE VET.

ACE vocational programs: Expectations and outcomes

In order to better understand the attraction ACE VET holds for students, this study looked at both student and provider perceptions of the reasons students chose to undertake ACE VET. Other factors relevant to this issue which were also examined included student and provider perceptions of ACE VET study outcomes, and student satisfaction with various aspects of ACE VET.

Why students choose ACE vocational programs

In the survey questionnaires, both providers and students were asked why they thought students chose to undertake ACE vocational study. Both groups were given a list of 16 possible reasons to choose from and were invited to add any others they wished to nominate. More than one reason could be chosen. All 69 providers and 379 students responded giving a total of 565 and 1181 responses respectively. Figure 4 shows the patterns of responses for the two groups. The percentages are proportions of the respective total number of responses for each group.

Inspection of figure 4 shows *More suitable course times*, *Course is at right level*, *Learn skills for current employment*, *To obtain a qualification*, and *More friendly, less formal organisation* were ranked relatively highly and therefore seen as important by both groups. At the other end of the scale, neither group saw *Access to childcare*, *Test ability to undertake VET*, *ACE provides more social contact*, or *Comply with employer requirement* as being common reasons for students undertaking vocational study with ACE.

Note: Low ranks of some of these reasons should be treated with caution. For example, if childcare was not available at the time of enrolment, people needing it would not enrol leaving only those who did to register their views in this study.

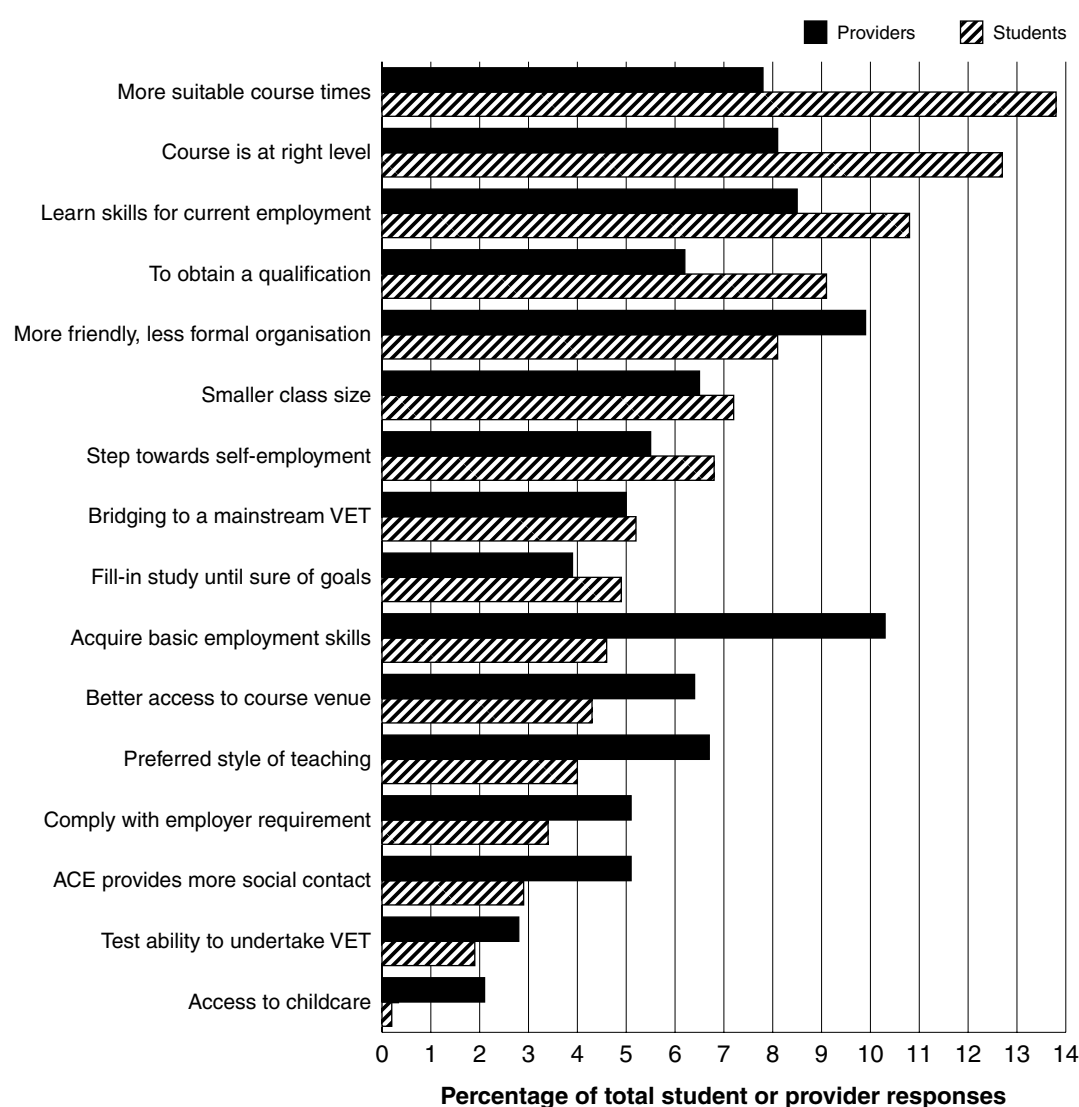
Prominent differences between providers and students were found for several of the listed reasons: while both students and providers saw *More suitable course times*, *Course is at right level* and *To obtain a qualification* as important reasons for students choosing ACE study, students attached more importance to them than did providers. Providers, on the other hand, were stronger in their choice of *Acquire basic employment skills*, *Preferred style of teaching* and *ACE provides more social contact*.

In making observations about differences between providers and students it needs to be pointed out that there could be confounding factors affecting some of them. For example, the term 'qualification' in *To obtain a qualification* may not have held the same meaning for students as it did for providers. Students may have perceived a qualification merely as a document confirming their participation in a course whereas providers may have seen it as formal Australian Qualifications Framework recognition. *Acquire basic employment skills*, too, may have been subject to different interpretation by students and providers. The rather

interesting difference obtained for *ACE provides more social contact* might be due, in part, to the nature of the student population surveyed. Perhaps ACE vocational students do not attach as much importance to it as the more traditional non-vocational students with whom providers might be more familiar.

The percentages shown in figure 4 are for both NSW and SA combined. There were no significant differences between the two States.

Figure 4: Perception of student reasons for undertaking ACE vocational study



In their additional comments on the issue of reasons for choosing ACE vocational study, four students mentioned they chose ACE because of the availability of short, or even intensive courses: 'TAFE courses were too long (14 weeks)—just wanted basic info in a short time' said one. Others said: 'Concentrated study over a few days'; 'Faster results (longer hours)'; and 'Couldn't bear undertaking a course that lasted a term or semester'.

An ACE college manager commented in similar vein: 'In our college particularly, we see a lot of current TAFE students choosing to use us because we have shorter, quicker, equivalent TAFE modules on offer here and they are not having to tie themselves in to doing a certificate course—they can come and do a module at a time'.

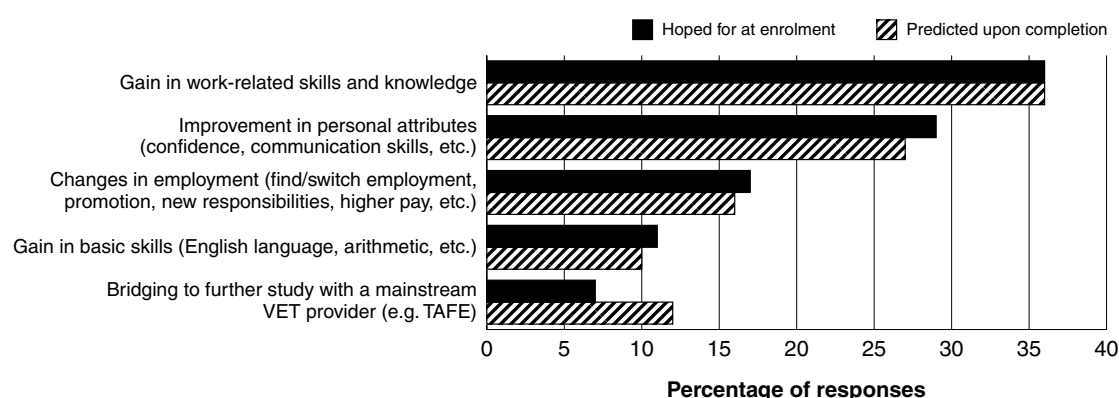
Of course, not all ACE students look for this type of study—as reported a few pages further on, some complained that their course: ‘was too condensed’, ‘moved very quickly’, ‘was not long enough’, or ‘was too short’. They seek, instead, the relaxed easygoing learning ACE also offers. To meet these conflicting demands, ACE should use its flexibility to offer options to satisfy both requirements—something it appears to have been able to do with considerable success in recent years.

Meeting student expectations

Student views

To find out how well ACE VET met the expectations of students, the students were first asked to recall what they had hoped their course would achieve for them at enrolment, and then, in the light of their experience in the course, what they expected it would actually achieve for them. It was also hoped that the comparison of the two sets of responses would give an indication of how realistic ACE students’ expectations were and thus, indirectly, how well informed they were when they enrolled. Three-hundred-and-seventy-nine students reported on their hopes when they enrolled and 371 reported on their actual outcomes. Figure 5 shows the comparative percentages of respondents choosing each of the outcomes listed in the questions.

Figure 5: Student views on outcomes of ACE VET

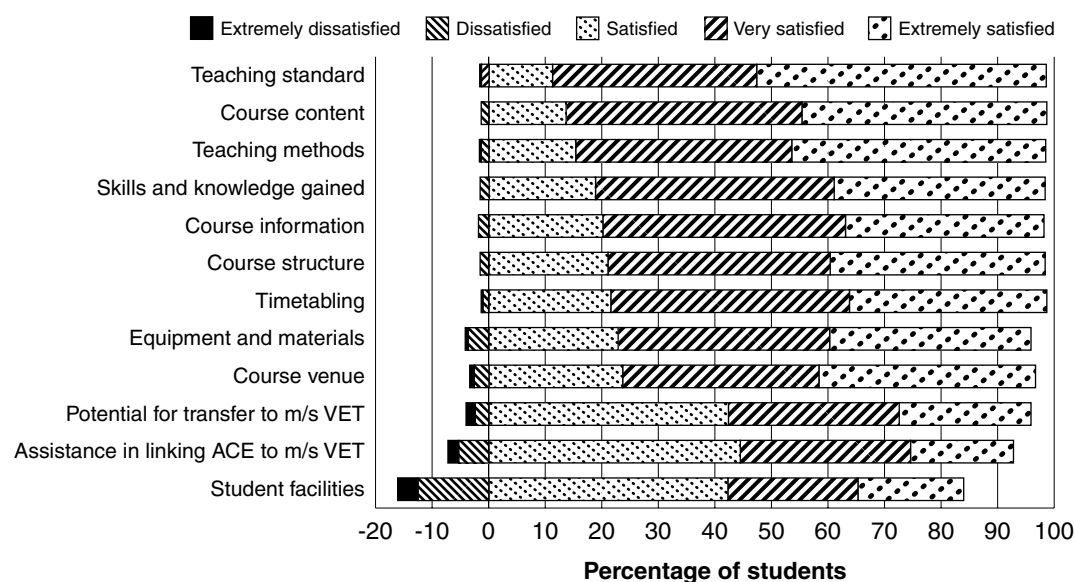


With one exception, the pairs of percentages were remarkably close (within 2% of each other) suggesting that students’ expectations were realised and implying that students were generally well informed at enrolment regarding what they were likely to gain from their course. The exception was for *Bridging to further study* where the predicted outcome after time in the course (12%) almost doubled the initially hoped for outcome (7%). This difference raises the possibility that some students may only have become aware of the possibility of bridging to further study while undertaking their course, or alternatively, may have only begun to see bridging as an option after they had gained confidence and/or a desire to continue their studies.

The first hypothesis is supported by the responses to a separate question in which students were asked to indicate their awareness of credit transfer provision prior to enrolling in their ACE course. Just over three-quarters either said they were unaware of credit transfer or were unable to answer the question. The combination of this result with that for *Bridging to further study*, above, indicates a need for ACE to better clarify and promote the option of credit transfer and bridging to further study. However, it is important that it be gently presented as an option, to be pursued if desired, because other evidence from this study shows that some students are intimidated by courses which appear too formal or too much like mainstream VET.

To determine how satisfied students were with their courses, they were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with 12 aspects of their course. Figure 6 shows the pattern of responses for each of the listed aspects. They are ranked in order of the combined percentages for *Very satisfied* and *Extremely satisfied*.

Figure 6: Student satisfaction with various aspects of course provision



Taken overall, students were very satisfied with ACE VET. Nine of the 12 aspects were given ratings of either *Very satisfied* or *Extremely satisfied* by more than 70% of the students responding, with four of them exceeding 80%.

Viewed from the other end of the scale, the proportion of students giving a rating of either *Dissatisfied* or *Most dissatisfied* was less than 5% for all but two of the listed aspects. The two which exceeded this figure were *Assistance in linking ACE study to mainstream VET* (7%) and *Student facilities* (16%).

When students were invited to suggest changes to aspects with which they were dissatisfied, ten responses were received. Of these, only three were relevant, one suggested better access to computers and two wanted provision of, or improvements to, cafeteria service.

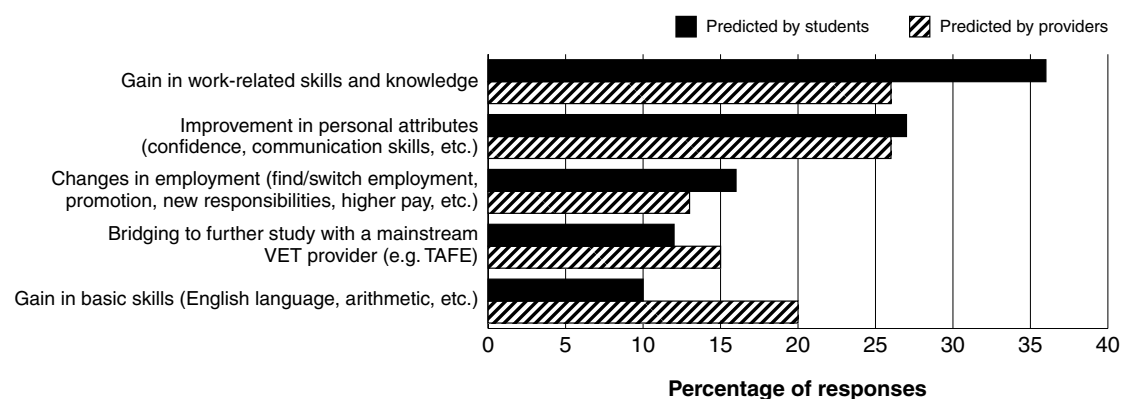
When asked to state any disadvantages associated with vocational learning through ACE, only 81 of the 383 students responded. Not all of the students wanted short courses and fast-paced learning. Some saw the fast pace at which their course progressed as a disadvantage, complaining that their course 'was too condensed', 'moved very quickly', 'was not long enough', or 'was too short'. Several students were disappointed that their course did not attract AUSTUDY, and one student observed that ACE teachers sometimes had to cater for a very 'broad group', presumably referring to students having a wide range of abilities and backgrounds. This, of course, is a characteristic of most groups of ACE students.

Provider views

For comparison, providers were asked to indicate what they thought were the most common outcomes gained by students from ACE vocational study. Their responses are shown in figure 7 in conjunction with the prediction responses of students which are repeated from figure 5. Comparison of the percentages shows general agreement on all but two outcomes: *Gain in basic skills* and *Gain in work-related skills and knowledge*.

Providers had higher expectations of *Gains in basic skills* than did students. A possible explanation for this may be that providers are more aware of the likelihood of students unconsciously improving basic skills as they learn the vocationally specific ones. For gains in work-related skills, the opposite was the case. Students had comparatively higher expectations than did providers.

Figure 7: Student–provider comparison of predicted student vocational learning outcomes



The outcome *Improvement in personal attributes* (which refers to items like organisational skills, communication skills, public speaking, confidence and assertiveness) was ranked equal first by providers and second by students. This element of ACE provision is obviously important—something ACE providers should not overlook in developing and promoting ACE VET—and something which could carry weight in any linking of ACE vocational study with mainstream VET. Indeed, it would seem ACE could be well positioned to be a leading provider of this type of vocational learning.

A side issue to this topic, raised by several commentators, was that labelling of competencies like communication skills as *soft skills* or *soft outcomes* tends to devalue them. Skills such as these can be very important in the workplace and are often sought by employers. In promoting these competencies, therefore, ACE should avoid connotations of softness.

In addition to being offered the same choice of predicted outcomes as students, providers were asked if *Improved prospects of finding employment* was likely to be a commonly gained outcome from ACE vocational study. Almost three-quarters (71%) of the providers agreed.

Improving ACE VET provision

Appropriateness of offering various categories of training

ACE offers various categories of vocational learning programs, including customised programs to suit individual students and organisations, industry and government-funded training, training in the workplace and training on the job. To identify which areas of vocational provision ACE should focus on, providers and students were asked to indicate which they believed would be the most appropriate category.

Provider opinions

Because there were marked differences between the opinions of respondents from NSW and those from SA providers, the results for the two States have been separated. They are given in figures 8 and 9. Although the SA sample was small, the differences are generally large enough to make comparison feasible.

Figure 8: NSW provider preferences for type of training (n=43)

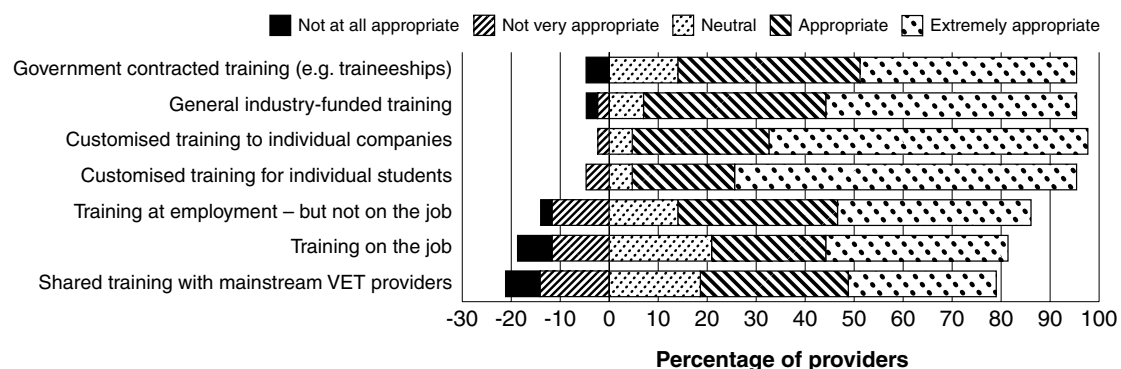
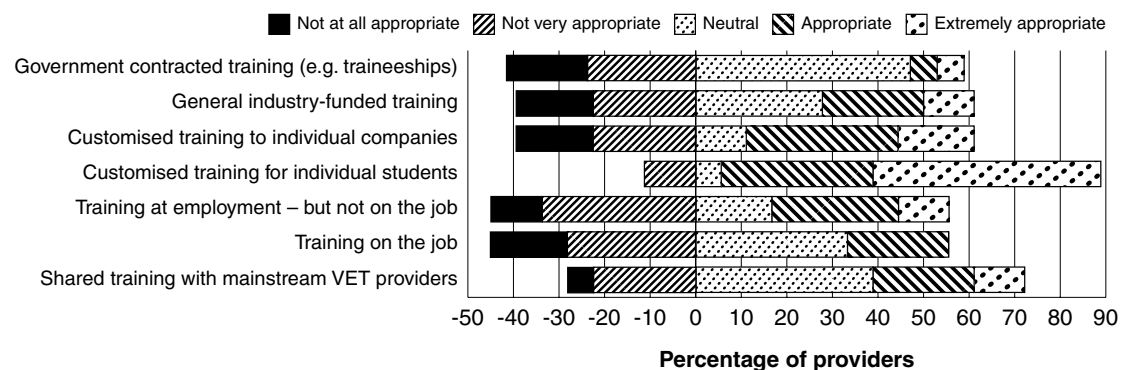


Figure 9: SA provider preferences for type of training (n=18)



General comparison of NSW and SA results showed that NSW providers tended to rate the appropriateness of most of the categories more highly than did their SA counterparts.

Between 60% and 91% of NSW providers rated all of the above categories as either *Appropriate* or *Extremely appropriate*. By comparison, all but one of the categories were similarly rated by only 11% to 39% of SA providers. The exception was *Customised training to meet individual student needs* which was highly rated by both groups (NSW 91%, SA 83%). As all of the categories are for *vocational learning*, these differences tend to support the argument that ACE in NSW is more strongly vocationally oriented than ACE in SA.

In NSW the categories most favoured (with more than 80% of providers rating them either *Appropriate* or *Extremely appropriate*) were: *Customised training under contract to individual companies* (93%), *Customised training to meet individual student needs* (91%), *General industry-funded training* (88%) and *Training under contract to government* (81%). As noted, in SA the only category that stood out to a similar degree was *Customised training to meet individual student needs* (83%).

While it could be expected, given the nature of ACE, that customised training, especially for individual students, would rate highly, it was rather surprising to find that providers, particularly in SA, did not rate training at the place of employment or on the job as strongly as some of the other categories. One reason suggested for this was the cost involved. If this is the case, it is a pity, because, with its inherent organisational flexibility and its popularity with learners, ACE would seem well suited to offering this type of training to industry.

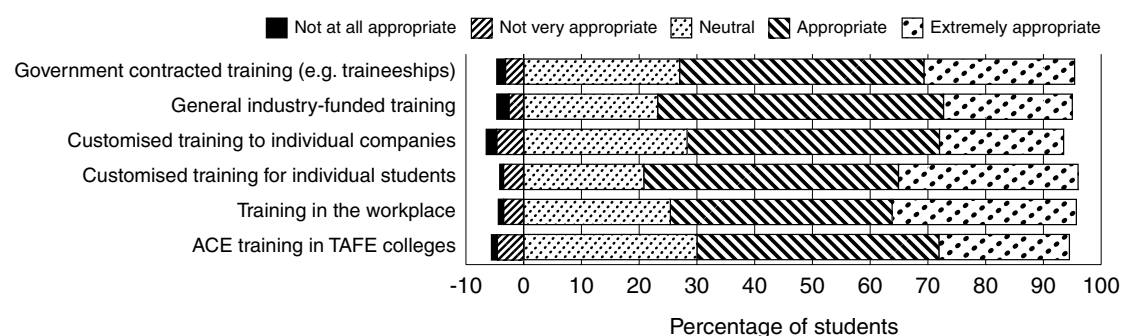
Earlier in this report it was indicated that the ability to provide ‘short, sharp, snappy’ courses was one of the perceived strengths of ACE. Some respondents suggested this as an area which ACE should not ignore, noting that short courses were what individuals and enterprises often wanted. ‘ACE will be supplying components of packages because that is what people want. They don’t want to tie themselves up for a long certificate course’, said one respondent, ‘Small employers have been found not to want to invest in long-term training’, said another. However, another respondent cautioned against allowing short courses to be misused by providing learning which was not properly aligned to training packages and qualifications.

The above comments raise the question of whether ACE should be promoting ‘full courses’, or whether it should be highlighting the fact that the equivalent of a full course could be completed as a series of short courses which could lead to the same qualification.

Student opinions

Students, too, were asked to indicate what sort of vocational learning they thought ACE should provide. Six categories of training were listed (two of which were slightly different from those listed for providers) and, using the same rating scale as the providers, they were asked to rate the appropriateness of each as a part of ACE provision. The results, displayed in figure 10, show that, unlike providers, students consistently favoured all categories.

Figure 10: Student preferences for type of training



Targetting industry needs

In interviews, providers and industry representatives were asked to identify ways in which ACE could best contribute to vocational training. The following is a categorised summary of their responses.

Improving the standard of training in the field

Some interviewees saw ACE as having the potential to contribute to improvement in the quality of vocational training by:

- ❖ providing supervision, mentoring or tutoring in association with mainstream VET providers in regions which mainstream VET providers find difficult to service because of remoteness or other reasons

One of the things I have seen is that in certain regions of the State there is a lack of good quality training providers. If ACE could provide assistance in these regions, even in the form of tutoring or mentoring in association with a TAFE provider, this would be valuable.

(Employer association representative, NSW)

- ❖ using its expertise as an education broker or co-ordinator to act on behalf of the many highly skilled vocational training personnel who, having taken retirement packages, would like to work on a casual or part-time basis but lack the resources or skills to market their services

These days there are many retired TAFE teachers who have a lot of valuable knowledge and experience and are the sorts of people we would be looking for in training partnerships. However, they are not very good at marketing themselves and tying up deals—the administrative side of it. They are much better at working in a group. This is something ACE could look at [providing the administrative know-how and backup to enable them to market their skills].

(ITAB executive representative, NSW)

- ❖ provide trainer-training to industry, especially in remote areas

Introduction to VET

Some commentators stressed the need for ACE to continue providing courses which encourage and assist people to commence or return to vocational study, particularly those intimidated by mainstream vocational training organisations and the prospect of ‘formal’ study. The following is from a union representative:

There is certainly something needed in between TAFE and not doing a course at all, and that's where I think ACE fits in. [ACE] short courses give people a taste in a very non-threatening environment, I'd hate to see that lost.

(Union representative, SA)

In similar vein, an ACE manager described ACE's encouragement to people to learn and to appreciate the value of learning, as a *catalyst* to further learning in other sectors.

Another ACE manager described an innovative approach using the services of TAFE lecturers to help allay student fears of TAFE study:

Students are apprehensive about going [on] to a TAFE institution. The leader of the [ACE] group is organising for TAFE lecturers to come down to the centre and present some of the introductory TAFE lessons at the centre so that students, and volunteer tutors, don't feel so intimidated.

(ACE manager, SA)

ACE provision of training packages

The introduction of training packages has changed the nature of industry training in Australia. Individuals no longer have to enrol in major institution-based courses. Training can

be undertaken in the workplace and on the job where appropriate. Previous learning and competencies already achieved can be given recognition and used for credit towards a qualification. Overall, this new system of training provides much greater flexibility, enabling learners to tailor their learning to the immediate needs of their jobs as well as to their long-term career needs.

For training packages to operate effectively there has to be good understanding and acceptance of the system by the providers, and the learners must be properly informed. ACE, with its flexibility and ability to adapt to change, its close affinity with students and its potential for communicating and interacting with local business—especially in smaller communities—should be able to capitalise on these assets to become a significant provider of training package-based learning.

ACE is probably in a better position to respond [to training packages] than most other sectors of the vocational training spectrum because, for many years ACE providers have been modularising and packaging training into short-course components for the market. ACE would have a very large pool of materials and course components that could be packaged for use in that way.

(ACE association representative, NSW)

There are a number of opportunities for ACE to access training packages, particularly at Certificate I and II levels, but even more specifically at the Mayer key competencies level which should be embedded in every training package. This could be a significant role for ACE.

(ITAB executive representative, SA)

However, training packages are designed to facilitate training and assessment in the workplace and on the job, and for that reason, are particularly well suited to workplace training. If ACE were to provide package-based training, it would need to consider carefully what workplace training would be required and how it might be accomplished. In this regard, ACE providers might be able to capitalise on their good relationships with local employers to arrange training in the workplace.

Flexible training

As noted in preceding sections of this report, flexibility is perceived as one of the hallmarks of ACE. It should come as no surprise therefore that the ability of ACE to provide flexibility in vocational learning was one of the aspects of ACE VET which featured prominently in relation to suggested targetting of industry needs by ACE.

More than three-quarters (77%) of providers indicated that ACE should target industry needs relating to flexibility in course provision—particularly, course structure, delivery format, timetabling and venue.

This view is supported by comments from industry itself, like the following from an ITAB representative:

Certainly, I think ACE could fill a gap as far as traineeship training goes—because they can offer it at night or the weekends—they are more able to go out and visit and do that sort of thing. It was because they were so well placed to do this sort of thing that we were so interested in working with them last year.

(ITAB executive representative, NSW)

An employer association representative also raised the possibility that ACE, with its greater flexibility, might be in a position to provide training to smaller groups than those acceptable to mainstream VET, possibly in the workplace if equipment resources were a problem.

Segmented training

One of the features of training frequently referred to in discussion of ACE VET is the ability of ACE to provide short, sharp, focussed courses. One commentator likened this to 'segmented training', going on to point out that, for economic as well as other reasons, there is likely to be a strong trend towards this style of delivery in the future. ACE, should be in a

good position to meet the demand. But other vocational providers, too, will move towards this mode of delivery, thus diminishing one of the more discernible differences between ACE providers and typical mainstream VET providers.

There have been progressive changes in eligibility for incentive payments away from providing support for existing workers. The government is turning its effort on training into a labour market initiative rather than a skills and economic development initiative. As a consequence, as employers are forced to pay more and more they are going to be saying 'Do we really need to have our people doing this certificate at AQF level II, III, IV or V, as is now starting to come on stream. Do we need to invest that amount of money on training to AQF III level which could take eight or nine hundred hours and involve direct costs of eight or nine thousand dollars, let alone indirect costs.' What employers are going to do is go back to 'just in time' training [with provision of] a minimum of training.

Instead of all bells and whistles training courses they will be wanting some training in personal development, problem-solving, leadership skills (particularly in a team-based work approach) and technical skills and knowledge such as in OH&S. And they will do it in bites. This type of training will be very similar to that which ACE might be offering—but to do it ... [ACE] will need to have people suitably qualified in workplace education, assessor training, occupational experience and technical knowledge.

As training providers are given less and less access to government funding for delivery of certificated qualifications, they too are going to be pursuing this segmented training mode. This may result in ACE becoming little different to other RTOs—remembering that ACE providers will need to be RTOs to deliver these competencies. (ITAB executive representative, SA)

Training via the Internet

Training via the Internet is a relatively new mode of vocational learning delivery. As much of it is computer-based and, in terms of capital equipment, relatively cheap to deliver, many ACE providers should be able to deliver such training, provided they have access to the expertise, suitable learning programs and the physical resources. Of course, in most programs it will also be necessary to observe the learner putting the knowledge and skills into practice. Here again, ACE with its broad regional coverage, should be in a better position than many mainstream VET providers to follow up this aspect of the training, particularly in outlying areas.

The Internet is going to be our greatest asset. We've already got the technology [in this college] to provide learning over the Internet. We've got the computers, we've got an expert who can do it, we've got one of the labs set up to provide external courses. We now need to look at how we write and conduct the courses—and whether we can afford to offer them. I think we can do it.

(ACE principal, NSW)

In our industry there are a lot of learning programs available on-line and through the Internet. Those sorts of programs still require a degree of personal contact. ACE could provide this.

(ITAB executive representative, SA)

Training partnerships with enterprises and assistance with workplace training

ACE, with its ability to develop close relationships with local enterprises, its strong regional presence, established educational background, and ability to recruit industry people with up-to-date knowledge and skills as trainers, should be able to develop partnerships with enterprises and assist them and their employees by providing training in the workplace. An ITAB representative summed it up as follows:

In central NSW we have examples where the local community college has entered into a training partnership—something we are very much into promoting. [In such a partnership] the RTO provides a mentor for mediated learning arrangements or on-site delivery, which may be partly or wholly in the enterprise or partly in the college.

We are promoting training partnerships up here, principally because we have a lot of small businesses in regional and rural areas where they can't send a person to a TAFE college. In the partnership, the employer undertakes to have a qualified workplace trainer and assessor at the worksite, and the training provider, as the RTO, provides the mentor, being the qualified teacher. The qualified teacher does not have to be a subject expert as they currently insist on in the TAFE system. Instead they need a teaching qualification and special expertise in co-ordinating learning programs at worksites, which is something we understand ACE is capable of. The worksite provides the subject matter experts. So it could be that a single teacher will supervise program delivery for a range of VET qualifications from a range of training packages, as is done in the UK.

There is an opportunity for ACE to make a major challenge in this area—not only outside the Sydney metropolitan area, but inside it as well.

We also look to ACE in NSW for slightly different aspects of program delivery than the custom streamed programs for community education [ACE typically delivers]. ITABs generally tend to focus on delivery in workplaces, particularly outside the metro area. We are looking to ACE and others, private providers mostly, to assist us with co-ordinating program deliveries at worksites. So our focus, and certainly the first concern of enterprises will be for existing employees. Under our current structure in NSW it is very difficult to facilitate those programs because of [some reluctance in the TAFE sector].

ACE is ideally suited to providing learning to existing employees. We would be asking ACE to look into entering into partnerships with employers at employment sites.

(ITAB executive representative, NSW)

However, if ACE wishes to do more in this area, it needs to ensure that the learning it presents is relevant to industry requirements and that students are properly informed of the nature of their course and where it can lead them. ITABs were nominated as important sources of advice on these issues.

If ACE goes into a workplace and provides training, the only complaints we ever get are that they are teaching the wrong stuff. We never get any complaints about the way they teach. On the other hand, if they teach it in a school hall or classroom, and then give out an industry qualification, we get complaints about everything. So their image is enhanced if they do it in the workplace and they do the right courses.

(ITAB executive representative, NSW)

When I came into the ITAB 11 years ago lot of TAFE programs were said to be industry based. It took us a while to re-categorise what were industry-specific programs from those which were self-enhancement. For example, we had really cloudy areas where people were doing dressmaking classes on a domestic sewing machine which was not relevant to working on industrial machines. If a person does training on a domestic sewing machine, they can't just move on to an industrial one—the nature of the work is completely different. As long as people are aware that some of the courses they do in ACE will not be suitable for employment in the [mainstream] industry, even though they may be suitable for 'cottage industry' purposes, the ITAB does not have a problem.

(ITAB executive representative, NSW)

ACE focus on individuals and businesses in the local community

Postcode analysis showed that businesses and other organisations which pay for people to attend ACE courses are located close to the ACE provider. When providers were asked if ACE should place a high priority on servicing the needs of individuals and businesses in local communities, almost all (98%) indicated that it should do so. One SA respondent commented: '[ACE] community centres are primarily a community resource for the local area'.

There can be little doubt that ACE provider personnel support most strongly the concept of locally focussed ACE provision. As discussed elsewhere in this report, the ability and willingness of ACE to provide this type of service is seen by providers, students and other interested parties as one of the strengths of ACE.

Entry-level training and job-seeking skills

Provision of training to enable individuals to gain entry-level qualifications in an industry, to provide them with job-seeking skills, to develop Mayer key competencies and, where necessary, to improve their skills in language and literacy, were all seen by project participants as vocational training areas in which ACE could make a significant contribution. Although this would tend to entrench the perception of ACE as a low-level provider, it is a role in which ACE is generally seen to excel. It is a category of learning provision which providers, in particular, felt should form an important part of ACE provision.

Management, office and interpersonal skills

ACE was seen as being well positioned to provide training for competencies like management, office administration and human relations—competencies which are becoming increasingly important in the workplace. The following is a list of some of the suggested areas:

- ❖ business management
- ❖ basic accounting
- ❖ communication
- ❖ computer packages (office and small business)
- ❖ report-writing
- ❖ supervision
- ❖ conflict resolution
- ❖ networking

These course areas were seen as being particularly suitable for ACE because they usually required little in the way of specialised equipment. In addition, the ability of ACE to operate flexibly and provide short, targetted courses was seen as an asset in courses of this nature: 'Whereas TAFE wants to run 6 month, 10 hours a week courses, ACE can offer the short, sharp, targetted course', said an ITAB representative.

Information technology

Because of the rapid rate of change in the area of information technology (IT) it was seen by several interviewees as one in which ACE could shine. It was suggested that ACE's flexibility gives it the capacity to employ tutors from industry with the latest knowledge and skills. Short, focussed courses designed to meet the specific needs of enterprise in areas such as introductory courses in Java, networking skills and vendor training could be offered by ACE.

I think that, in NSW, ACE is ideally placed in many ways to pick up the IT training package because they deliver short courses and they have got the flexibility. Whereas TAFE is like a big ship which is hard to move around, ACE is smaller and more flexible and adaptable. The industry wants short courses—but it hasn't happened. If some of the ACE colleges already interested in IT could become more focussed, they could certainly get a lot of business and I'd be happy to work closely with them.
(ITAB executive representative NSW)

Customised training

The organisational flexibility of ACE plus the wide-ranging availability of its teaching staff and currency of their expertise place ACE in a particularly strong position to provide customised training, as the following comment from an ACE co-ordinator illustrates.

There is an accredited hospitality course that people can do, but a lot of the locally based employers find that people learn a lot of airy-fairy things, so they asked us to give them an industry based course which [more closely met their needs]—they told us what they wanted in it. We are currently running one in basic bar service and we have just done one in MYOB [Mind Your Own Business]

computer program]. We can give people exactly what industry is looking for so they can get out and get a job. Although we follow an accredited curriculum and we fulfil all the competencies, we are able to be a little bit creative.

(ACE co-ordinator, NSW)

Vocational training for special groups

ACE has long been a provider of learning to special needs groups such as people with low language or literacy skills, people with low levels of schooling, women needing to re-enter the work force, indigenous groups, people with disabilities and job seekers. It has been said that, for many of these people, ACE learning plays an important role in breaking down barriers to vocational study. However, one provider pointed out that, despite the common perception of ACE as a significant provider for disadvantaged groups, ACE, in fact, is quite limited in what it can do.

It is a myth that ACE caters largely for disadvantaged groups. ACE is the organisation least capable of catering for these groups. ACE should be offering courses for them but is probably least able to do so. It's very expensive and we don't have the resources. The exception would be English language programs.

(ACE principal, NSW)

When providers were asked to rate how important it was for ACE to make special provision for these groups to undertake vocational study, just on three-quarters (76%) felt that it was either *Extremely important* or *Important*. Further analysis showed that NSW respondents tended to attach more importance to this type of provision than did their SA counterparts. When asked to nominate any groups that should be specially targetted, those most commonly cited were: people with low language or literacy skills, unemployed people, indigenous people, people with disabilities, women, and older people.

When students were similarly asked to rate how important they thought it was for ACE to offer vocational learning for groups with special needs, an even greater proportion (84%) indicated that such provision was either *Extremely important* or *Important*.

Formal training for apprentices and trainees

ACE already provides language, literacy and similar learning to apprentices who voluntarily seek assistance. In their questionnaires providers and students were asked if there were any ways in which ACE should extend its vocational provision into more formal training for apprentices. Their responses were mixed.

Of the 24 providers who responded, seven stated outright that ACE should not be involved in provision of training for apprentices and three had reservations about ACE involvement, one because of limitations in venues and equipment, and the others stating that trainees rather than apprentices should be a focus. Of those who were in favour of extending ACE VET for apprentices, five specified that it should be done in collaboration with trainers, employers, employer groups or other industry representatives. The others merely expressed general agreement with the concept.

Of the 36 responses received from students on this issue, 20 were in favour of some form of extension and ten were against, the others were indeterminate.

Noteworthy comments and suggestions from students who favoured ACE involvement in apprenticeship training referred to: ACE working with apprenticeship training providers; ACE working with group apprentice training schemes; ACE tutors assisting in the workplace; ACE developing strategic alliances with companies; and ACE covering areas which mainstream VET tended to treat cursorily—such as communication skills.

Students who were against ACE playing a formal role in apprenticeship training maintained that this type of training should be restricted to TAFE and that any access by apprentices to ACE should be voluntary.

Vocational learning for people affected by industry change

In today's society significant changes are taking place in the world of work. Paid employment is no longer accessible to everyone, multiple career changes are the norm, changes in employment are forced on people by circumstances out of their control and individuals are being forced to become more entrepreneurial.

For young people, this new era means they will be forced to consider options never contemplated by their parents: the need to acquire and extend their knowledge and skills through their own initiative rather than as part of their employment, the need to present well and sell their knowledge and skills to a potential employer or client, and the need, in some cases, to commence their working careers as self-employed individuals.

For older people, the changes can be bewildering, if not frightening. The need for change and retraining in an existing job, the need to compete more intensely for employment, and the prospect of self-employment as an alternative to no employment at all are the kinds of changes which may have to be faced at some time or other in today's world.

There can be little doubt that ACE has the potential to play a significant and important role in helping people cope with these challenges. The following cross-section of comments, from an employer association, an ITAB and a union, provide insight into how industry sees some of the issues involved.

In the future there will be an increasing likelihood that people will not be able to leave school and go into a full-time job, or even a part-time or casual job, they may need to create their own job, perhaps by starting out as a contractor. To do this, they will need to learn enterprise skills to enable them to look for, and take advantage of opportunities. In turn this will increase their employability. A lot of the skills are related to 'what's going on out there—how do I create a network of people'. The same skills will also be needed at the other end of the spectrum. Mature-age people, many of whom may be looking at 30–40 years of retirement will be looking to do something useful in their life. Provision of enterprise skills (together with lifelong learning) is an area that ACE should consider.

People today, particularly in the 40–50 year age group are feeling the need to do something different, even if they are not being displaced or made redundant. They are feeling they need a change in their lives—there is a feeling of restlessness. But people don't know how to go about changing their careers, or they don't know what the options are. I think ACE has a role to play here too—just making people aware of what's happening in the world, what's happening out there and how their own skills and abilities can fit in. I put it under the broad heading of self-knowledge. A real understanding of yourself is important for a productive person and a productive society.

(Employer association representative, SA)

ACE could look at helping existing employees, for example those who fall in the 45–55 age group who have left their employment or been made redundant and are looking for employment in another field. In fact there are a number of cohorts of people who might be helped by the ACE network including critically long term unemployed, particularly in the 20–25 age group, and in some cases second generation unemployed, people of low socio-economic backgrounds, and the recently retired.

ACE needs to be careful who or what it markets itself to. The best people to approach would be in the industry sectors that have experienced massive structural changes and changes to work practices such as the printing industry. The approach should be made by talking to employers—there are many employers out there who are wanting to keep staff that have been there a long time because they are valuable.

(ITAB executive representative, SA)

The need for programs for people wishing to brush up and expand their skills is probably less from people wanting to come into an industry than from people already in the industry who are losing their jobs, such as in an industry which is moving off shore so there are no further opportunities and they have to look elsewhere.

(Union representative, SA)

Provision of individualised learning for Centrelink customers

In providing government-funded VET, some ACE providers have focussed on catering for individualised learning for placement and self-referral students from Centrelink and employment agencies which use a case-management approach.

We have got five Centrelink offices in our immediate region and our contact with them has increased significantly over the last 12 months. We have a very good process going now with Centrelink officers giving their individual case clients authority to enrol. The enrolments are a result of our college formally approaching Centrelink. We would visit Centrelink on a regular basis and talk to officers, seeking their advice and letting them know about government-funded courses we were running, and we would send them our brochures. (ACE principal, NSW)

Providers were asked in their questionnaire if this should be a significant focus of ACE. The responses indicated that this was one of the few issues for which there was no clear trend. Just over half (51%) felt that it should be a significant focus leaving 49% who felt it should not.

Risks associated with the move into vocational learning

Not everyone was completely at ease with ACE moving into VET. Some respondents to the provider questionnaire expressed concerns about issues like: ACE being pushed into VET as a means of obtaining additional funding, traditional ACE students being disadvantaged, ACE merely becoming a cheap source of VET learning, and ACE losing its educational purpose.

ACE VET information

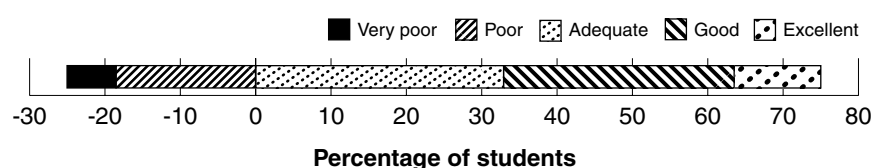
This section deals with the effectiveness of ACE in disseminating information about the vocational programs it provides. It begins by looking at the level of awareness of ACE VET as an indicator of effectiveness—first for students, then providers and finally industry. This is followed by discussion of the types of vocational program information provided by ACE and the channels through which it is disseminated.

Awareness of ACE VET

Student awareness

When students were asked to rate the adequacy of their personal knowledge of ACE vocational education provision, well over a third (42%) rated it as *Excellent* or *Good*, about a third (33%) rated it as *Adequate* and a quarter (25%) as *Poor* or *Very poor*. These results are shown in figure 11.

Figure 11: Student self-rating of knowledge about ACE vocational choices



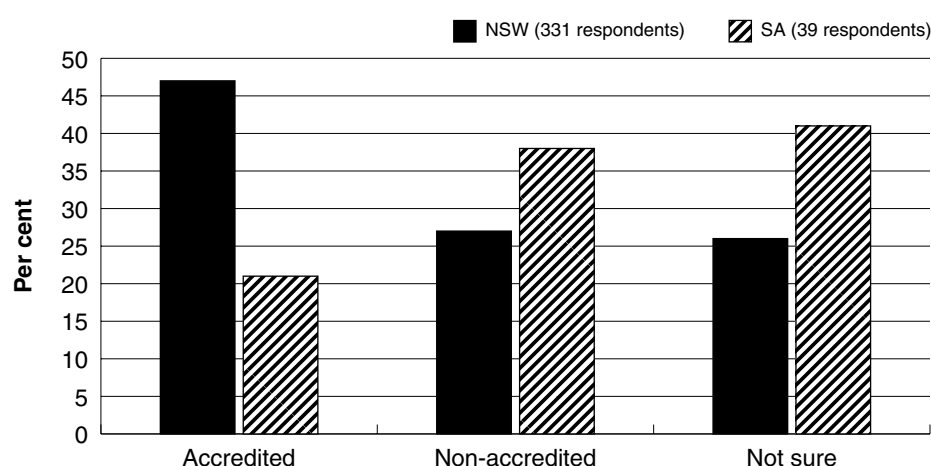
Students were also asked two questions about credit transfer: firstly, whether they were aware of the existence of credit transfer before they enrolled for ACE study, and secondly, whether availability of credit transfer would influence their decision to study with ACE. Just over three-quarters (76%) said they were not aware of any provisions for credit transfer and close to half (43%) said that awareness of credit transfer provisions would influence their decision to enrol.

The responses to these questions lead to the inference that significant numbers of prospective students are not receiving information which could be vital in determining whether or not they pursue ACE vocational study.

When students were asked if the course they were studying was accredited, just over a quarter (26%) of the NSW students and well over a third (41%) of the SA students were not sure (see figure 12), suggesting that this aspect of ACE course provision could be more clearly stated in ACE course information. However, it should be noted that some providers have indicated in responses and interviews that they did not actively promote the fact that a course was accredited because it tended to 'scare students off'. This may account for some of the apparent lack of student awareness.

As an interesting sidelight, the results in figure 12 also show that a far greater proportion of NSW students reported that their course was accredited than did those from SA (47% in NSW, 21% in SA). This difference probably reflects what some respondents referred to as the 'softer' vocational emphasis in SA ACE.

Figure 12: Student responses re course accreditation



Provider awareness

ACE providers should be expected to play a vital role in the provision of information to students relating to credit transfer and other aspects of ACE–mainstream VET linkages. However, when providers were asked to rate the knowledge of relevant ACE staff about mainstream VET provision and credit transfer options almost half (48%) indicated either *Poor* or *Very poor* and a further third (35%) indicated the mid-scale rating of *Adequate*. The consensus amongst ACE providers, therefore, was that about half of the ACE personnel who deal with students have inadequate knowledge of information important to students who wished to link their ACE studies with mainstream VET. Indeed, one student reported that: ‘contract teachers [in ACE] were rarely provided with information relating to credits and RPL’.

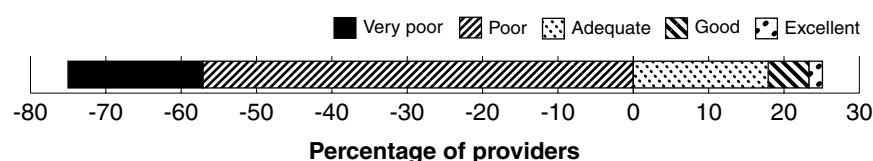
On the other hand, providers’ general knowledge of ACE VET was higher. When asked to indicate if they knew of any programs offered by ACE that were similar to mainstream VET (for example, programs similar to those offered by TAFE), almost two-thirds (63%) said they did, citing *Computing*, *Information technology*, *Business administration*, *Workplace training*, *Teaching*, *Childcare*, *Nursing* and *Hospitality* as examples. When asked if their ACE organisation offered accredited courses 85% indicated it did.

ACE perceptions of mainstream VET staff knowledge of ACE VET

While this study was not designed to investigate mainstream VET staff awareness of ACE VET provision and linkages, it was of interest to know how their awareness was perceived by ACE providers. When asked to rate mainstream VET staff knowledge of ACE VET provision, 75% of ACE providers indicated either *Poor* or *Very poor*, and 18% indicated *Adequate*. The results are summarised in figure 13. In the eyes of ACE personnel, it seems, mainstream VET provider staff do not have adequate knowledge of ACE vocational programs and credit transfer options. There were no marked differences between the two States; however, in both States, managers tended to be more critical than co-ordinators who, in turn, were more critical than teaching staff.

Strategies for increasing mainstream VET staff knowledge of ACE VET are discussed later in this report.

Figure 13: ACE opinion of mainstream VET knowledge of ACE VET



Industry training advisory bodies (ITABs)

Not all ITABs were familiar with ACE. In some cases this may have been because ACE providers did not offer training specifically for their industry sectors (most likely because their training was predominantly technical, highly specialised, or required expensive equipment). ITABs in NSW generally appeared more aware of ACE than those in SA, possibly reflecting a stronger emphasis on vocational training in NSW ACE.

For some ITAB personnel, knowledge of ACE arose from personal experience, for instance undertaking ACE study themselves, rather than through formal contact between ACE and the ITAB (respondents from industry organisations other than ITABs commented similarly).

Where ITAB knowledge of ACE VET did exist, it came through ITAB approaches to ACE as well as ACE approaches to ITABs. For example, one ITAB representative visited ACE centres to explain and discuss a new training package. Another described how the ITAB sought to work co-operatively with ACE providers in regional and remote areas:

We try to develop links with RTOs who deliver programs to [our industries] in NSW, and ACE plays a role here in regional and remote communities. Where we know of initiatives taking place in particular regional areas we will sometimes refer people to ACE colleges as a way of stimulating a market beyond that offered by TAFE. (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

In NSW, BACE appears to have been quite active in marketing ACE to some ITABs. Usually, it seems, this has been done through BACE organised meetings and forums to which ITAB representatives have been invited.

The Board [BACE] has made quite an effort over the past couple of years to develop contacts with ITABs and they have actually held summit meetings with the ITAB network here—presenting the case for the Board, particularly in rural areas of NSW. (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

Employers and employer bodies

If ACE is to make any contribution of significance to VET, there must be awareness of ACE VET in the workplace, not only by employees, but by employers as well. When ACE providers and industry personnel were asked to comment on employer awareness of ACE, their responses suggested that employers generally lacked any substantial awareness of the role ACE is playing, or could play, in vocational education. 'We are constantly getting feedback when we get a new business on board that they either did not know we existed, or did not know what we did', said one ACE principal.

Some commentators also pointed out that knowledge of ACE was likely to be influenced by the size of the organisation and the nature of the community in which it was located. Smaller businesses and those located in regional or country centres were more likely to have had contact with ACE than larger or urban-based businesses. There appeared to be several reasons for this: the types of courses offered by ACE suited small business operators better, the small business operators were more in touch with their local communities, and ACE often has a stronger presence in regional communities than mainstream VET.

As business support organisations and representatives of employers, employer chambers, chambers of commerce, business centres and similar bodies have the potential to increase awareness of (and possibly even promote) ACE VET to employers. But to do this, the employer bodies must, themselves, be aware of what ACE has to offer. When spokespersons for employer bodies were asked what they and other representatives of their organisations knew of ACE VET, it was found that awareness of ACE VET was generally limited.

I think our Board would know [very little] about ACE—and these are senior people in industry. Our training administrators and our trainers would know a little bit, but to my knowledge they don't have any direct interaction. (Employer association representative, SA)

[Our organisation's] knowledge of ACE vocational provision is very patchy. Some [of our people] in their local regions have struck up associations with ACE and they know a little about what is going on, but not in a comprehensive way. Until I moved into this position I didn't know they offered VET courses. And most people I have spoken to don't seem to know that either.

(Employer association representative, NSW)

Increased knowledge of ACE VET would place these organisations in a better position to advise and assist the employers they represent.

If ACE VET is to operate with maximum effectiveness, it is important that credit transfer and pathways not only be available but that their existence be well known. Responses from industry personnel suggest that industry generally knows little about credit transfer and pathways that do exist. Furthermore, there is a general lack of understanding of the concepts. This would particularly apply to the small employers and employees who are unlikely to be familiar with educational concepts and terminology.

Unions

Since the role of unions is centred on the welfare of employees, it was expected that they would have an interest in vocational education opportunities available to them. Participants in this study (including union spokespersons) were therefore invited to comment on their perceptions of union awareness and activity in relation to ACE VET.

Overall, general opinion was that unions were largely unaware of ACE VET. The awareness that did exist appeared to be mainly derived from staff experience of ACE gained on a personal basis. It was pointed out that, by and large, unions were more concerned with training related to industrial matters such as occupational health and safety (OH&S) and leadership than that related to the technical aspects of the work an employee performed.

Types of information provided

Providers were asked to indicate what types of information were generally provided to prospective students. *Course listings*, *Course content* and *Timetabling* were each chosen by a large proportion of the providers who responded (92%, 89% and 84% respectively). However, only 23% indicated their organisation provided information on *Credit transfer options and procedures*. Lack of this information may result in students enrolling in mainstream VET when their preference for initial vocational study might have been ACE VET instead. A loss to ACE and unnecessary disappointment for the students.

When providers were asked to state who, within the organisation, provided the information to students, the most common responses (listed in order of frequency) were:

- ❖ teaching staff
- ❖ administration staff
- ❖ program co-ordinators

The dissemination methods frequently mentioned by the providers were:

- ❖ in-person discussions with students
- ❖ leaflets and brochures
- ❖ telephone
- ❖ mail
- ❖ print media
- ❖ electronic media (internet, email, fax)

Surprisingly, only one of the 55 respondents to the question mentioned information sessions—a mode of information provision commonly used in mainstream VET.

Provider interviews gave further insight into the means used to communicate vocational course information to industry and some of the difficulties encountered. The following is a sample:

The main way we make contact with industry at the moment is through our brochures where employees see something and go to their boss saying they would like to do it, or through word of mouth where one employee does a course then tells others. We are not resourced to go out and talk to industry or ring up employers. Some tutors do things off their own bat and arrange for a set of brochures to be sent out next time around. It's good that they do it—we just have to rely on them at the moment. (ACE principal, NSW)

What we did was to employ a person to go out and sell our courses. The proviso was they had to cover their own wage after which they moved on to a commission basis. That has worked very well, but you have got to get the right type of person. The young woman who is doing it now is exceptional. Her approach is: 'If you want to do it, whatever it is, we will either develop the program or find someone who already has it'. (ACE principal, NSW)

We print 100 000 copies of the college brochure each term. 80 000 are letter-box distributed. The remaining 20 000 are mailed to past students, and distributed to libraries, community centres, businesses, doctors' surgeries, TAFE institutes and schools. For special training courses like contracted training provision or traineeships we have individual fliers and advertise in the local press. (ACE principal, NSW)

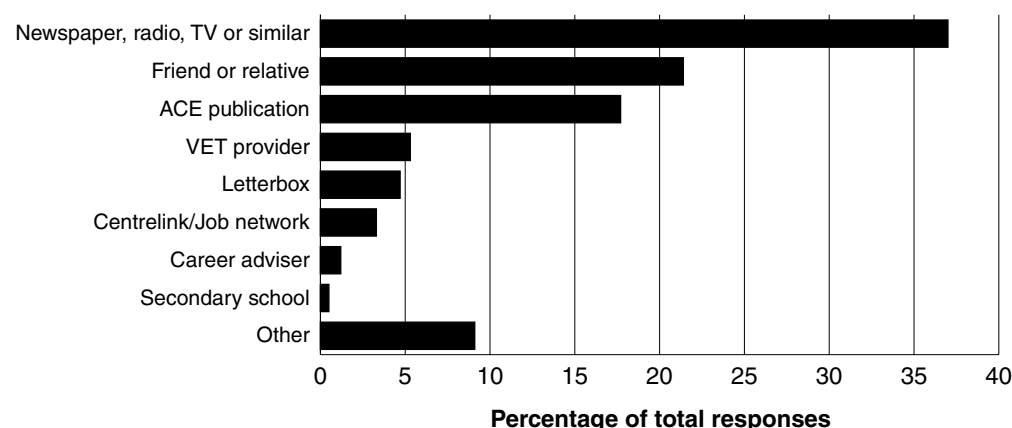
Sources of information

Students

When students were asked to indicate how they found out about their courses, over a third (37%) of students nominated the media (newspaper, radio, TV or similar), and about a fifth nominated friends or relatives (21%), or an ACE publication (brochures, leaflets, newspaper inserts) (18%). Figure 14 shows the results for all the information sources listed in the question.

Some students indicated they were continuing on from previous enrolments: 'I have undertaken many of their courses over the past five years'. Other comments were: 'I thought it was good that one organisation would promote another's course' (apparently referring to cross-promotion between ACE and mainstream VET) and '[It was] part of a redundancy package'. The last comment reminds us that ACE could have a role to play in providing vocational education to redundant employees, many of whom need to extend their knowledge and skills but may be uncomfortable about returning to 'formal' study.

Figure 14: How students found out about their ACE course



Industry bodies

In interviews, industry bodies comprising employer associations, ITABs and unions were asked what ACE vocational information they received and where it came from. Responses suggest that there is little concerted effort by ACE to provide vocational program information to industry. Apart from the generic ACE brochures that fortuitously found their way to industry or were noticed in the media (particularly those from WEA), the only other significant source mentioned was through contact initiated by the industry bodies.

From time to time one sees programs that are advertised in the media and that would be about the only time people would be aware of what's going on, other than by word of mouth.

(Employer association representative, SA)

Occasionally a consultant will [bring in] some information they have obtained in the field, which tends to be brochures.

(Employer association representative, NSW)

We seldom get information about programs promoted by ACE—if there are any [ACE] shortcomings in NSW, that is probably one of them. They have a website, [but it is mainly about community education] which we are not generally interested in. We have [also] had some familiarisation meetings with ACE in NSW. ACE needs to market [its vocational programs] more aggressively.

(ITAB executive representative, NSW)

We don't get any information sent to us by ACE. However, I have gained some useful knowledge from speaking to a number of ACE personnel last year in the course of a series of visits to regional and metropolitan ACE centres to explain and discuss a training package.

(ITAB executive representative, NSW)

We receive information about ACE from three sources: the Board of Adult and Community Education, phone calls from individual ACE colleges about particular matters (around once a week), or a person or another training organisation or an employer rings up about a problem or a complaint about ACE.

(ITAB executive representative, NSW)