Permeating policy and practice: research into adult learning with a view to the future

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Background
This paper explores the relationship between policy, practice and research within an Australian adult community education (ACE) context. It comprises two parts: it firstly presents the findings of two research studies conducted for the Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board of Victoria, Australia during the period 2004-2007; and secondly, it reflects upon the impact of this research, resulting from a range of dissemination strategies, including practitioner-research projects supported by funding and mentoring by professional researchers.

Adult Community Education (ACE), defined as ‘organised learning in community settings’ (Clemans et al. 2003, p.7) can be found across most Australian states. Indeed in three Australian states it plays an important role in the provision of vocational education and training (VET), engaging between 12 and 17 per cent of all VET students in those states (NCVER 2008). In Victoria, ACE providers are defined as those that are community-owned and managed and not-for-profit (Volkoff & Walstab, 2007). The largest and most active in Australia (Government of Victoria, 2008), the Victorian ACE sector provides education and training to more than 125,000 learners (ACFEB 2008) through around 340 providers spread across the state. These learners participate in programs of five broad types. Four of these are publicly funded through the Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board: adult literacy and numeracy; employment skills; senior school certificates; and vocational programs. The fifth type, enrichment programs are provided on a full cost recovery basis.

A series of key national and Victorian policy statements have highlighted the growing gaps between Australians in relation to skill levels and qualifications and the need to increase skills and workforce participation of disadvantaged groups (Council of Australian Governments 2006, State of Victoria 2004). They also have emphasised the importance of accessible lifelong and ‘second chance’ learning (State of Victoria, 2006) and noted the need for the ACE sector to play a vital role in engaging people from disadvantaged groups, meeting entry level training needs and providing a platform for higher level VET study (MCEETYA 2002, State of Victoria 2002, 2004). The ACE sector has taken up the challenge of making a significant contribution to the
state’s skill building agenda, carving out for itself ‘… an important place in the state’s policy framework’ (McInytre 2007, p.8). In 2007, Victorian ACE organisations provided VET for around 79,000 learners engaging around 17 per cent of the state’s total VET students. This represents just below half of all the students who engaged in VET within the ACE sector nationally (NCVER, 2008).

The ACFE Board of Victoria has recognised the importance of high quality strategic research in strengthening the ACE sector’s position within this policy context through a Framework for Research and Evaluation in ACFE (ACFEB 2002). As part of this strategy, it commissioned three Victorian universities to undertake key research studies focussed upon: outcomes and pathways of ACE particularly for under-represented groups; pedagogical and curriculum innovations to build capability for provision in ACE; and the role of community organisations in strengthening communities.

Building on the 2002 framework, the ACFE Board adopted the ACE Research Strategy 2005-07 – Putting Research to Work (ACFEB 2005), recognising the importance of the ‘role of research in an evidence-based approach to policy and program development’ (p.2). However, it also placed a priority on broadening the benefits to the ACE sector of the high level research projects that had by this time been completed by the three universities. It sought to extend ‘…the capability of ACE practitioners to use high level research, to apply its findings, and, where appropriate, undertake research of their own’ (ACFEB 2005, p.2) to facilitate the provision of ‘innovative and responsive learning environments’ for their communities.

The second part of this paper examines the effectiveness of the various strategies used to maximise the ‘usefulness’ of the original research. It will discuss the processes that were implemented, practitioner-researcher reflections on their experiences and the outcomes of the projects they completed.

The research studies and their findings
The University of Melbourne was commissioned to undertake one of the three research studies mentioned above - a three year longitudinal study of ACE learners (Walstab, Volkoff & Teese 2005, 2006) that sought to measure the ACE sector’s effectiveness in provision of outcomes and pathways and its community reach.

The first stage of our project, undertaken in 2004, involved intensive work with five selected ACFE regions and over 40 ACE providers. A cross-section of ACE learners (n=3047) in these providers undertook a classroom-based survey. The second and third stages involved recontact surveys with a sample of respondents 12 and 24 months after the initial survey - in 2005 and 2006 respectively. This yielded data over three years for a total of 646 ACE
learners across Victoria. The research identified patterns of participation in relation to a range of social and demographic variables, tracked course completions and student destinations, and identified longer term outcomes and benefits of participation in ACE.

Our study identified some key benefits of studying in ACE, as well as some challenges for the sector. It was clear from the evidence gathered that ACE study provides a platform for further study – offering encouragement, laying a foundation and assisting with entry to new and higher level courses, both within and beyond the ACE sector. Overall completion rates were high (64%) and higher still for people from a language background other than English (LBOTE) (75%). Almost three quarters (74%) of learners who had commenced in Certificate 1 courses (the lowest level of Certificate) and proceeded to study in new courses on completion, did so at a higher qualification level.

Learners reported strong satisfaction with their experiences of learning in ACE, with 98 per cent of the cohort agreeing with the statements that ‘learning was enjoyable for you’, ‘overall the teaching was good’, ‘it was easy to get along with the teachers’ and ‘everyone was made to feel welcome’. There were also strong endorsements of ‘a supportive learning environment’ (97%), access to ‘individual help and guidance’ (95%) and being able to ‘learn at your own pace’ (91%) and ‘own level’ (90%). The responses of LBOTE learners and those of men were even more positive. However, unemployed people and people with a low socio-economic status were less positive and were more likely to experience difficulties.

There was evidence that ACE helped to create connections with work – building employment skills for workers and strongly supporting the acquisition of jobs for unemployed people. The proportion of workers employed full-time more than doubled from 13 per cent in 2004 to 28 per cent in 2006, while unemployment fell from 24 per cent of the cohort in 2004 to only 8 per cent in 2006. Indeed of all those who were unemployed in 2004, 63 per cent were in work in 2006. Community contribution through volunteering also grew strongly between 2004 and 2006 among full-time and part-time workers, the unemployed and those not in the labour force.

Understanding of Australian culture and values was also strengthened through ACE participation. Half of all respondents reported that their ACE study had helped them to ‘understand how Australians live and what they think’ and three quarters of LBOTE learners reported this, verifying the value of the opportunities that the ACE environment provided for building their understanding of life in a new country and culture contributing to social cohesion within highly multicultural communities.

At the conclusion of the ACE Longitudinal Study, the University of Melbourne
was commissioned to undertake a second study, designed to provide investigative background research to inform and advise priority setting of the ACFE Board of Victoria (Volkoff & Walstab, 2007). This research involved a contextual analysis of Victorian and national human capital development and ACE policy, other recent and relevant research on educational attainment and lifelong learning, and a detailed analysis and matching of 2005 student level (AVETMISS) data with ACE program and student priorities. Strengths of the Victorian ACE sector, challenges that face ACE and potential areas for further investigation were identified.

Our study found that as a sector, ACE was able to effectively engage older workers, unemployed people, people not in the labour force and the most educationally disadvantaged learners, including indigenous people, people with a disability, people with incomplete schooling and those resident in small rural communities with poor access to alternative education and training opportunities. We identified that in general, ACE reaches greater proportions of the most disadvantaged people in Victoria than Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or Private providers. A strength of the ACE sector is its distinctive style of provision that utilises effective adult learning pedagogies commonly supplemented with wide ranging support for the non-educational issues of learners, provided in house, or brokered through community agencies. Another strength is its connectedness with its providers engaging with local government schools, other VET providers and community support agencies allowing it to both reach prospective learners and effectively support the education and training of learners with a very wide range of characteristics.

Through its contributions to improved literacy and numeracy skills, secondary school completions, entry level vocational and employability skills and employment outcomes, the ACE sector has an economic impact on Victoria and is of strategic importance to it. In addition, it is a most cost effective sector because its diversified funding base, low community cost infrastructure, flat administrative structures and volunteer staff contributions are matched with high levels of learner satisfaction, strong completion rates and employment outcomes.

While the ACE sector needs to grow to meet the expanding education and training needs of groups in the community that other sectors choose not to or cannot serve, there are challenges for ACE. These include:

- securing sufficient funding and growing the required expertise to meet the complex needs of their learners;
- developing innovative responses to engage hard-to-reach groups in the community;
- building improved pathways to higher level study;
- expanding employment advocacy and career advice and guidance roles; and
• providing greater access to accredited learning, including through the use of technology, particularly in small rural communities where no other provider will deliver.

Making the research ‘useful’
Research on ACE in Victoria, compared with other states, has been relatively strong as a result of the ACE sector’s high community profile and government support. Within the ACE sector generally, there has historically been an ethos that ‘…attempts to ground research in practice’ (Golding et al 2000, p.25). The commissioning by the ACFE Board of a growing number of more formally conducted ‘academic’ research studies by universities meant that there was a risk that the findings, while informing policy and priority setting at the central level, would fail to influence, inform or even reach practitioners.

Davies et al (2005) in their symposium on ‘approaches to assessing research impact’ identified the policy drivers for ‘… greater rigour in the prioritisation of research efforts’ (p.4) not just related to the direction of the research enquiries, or the modes of research funding, but also the organisation of the strategies to be used to promote practitioner involvement and post-research implementation. The ACFE Board as part of their ‘Putting Research to Work: ACE Research Strategy, 2005-2007’ initiated a multi-faceted dissemination strategy following completion of our longitudinal study. This strategy was designed to strengthen the nexus between policy, research and practice by informing a broad range of stakeholders across Victoria and supporting and extending the capability of ACE practitioners to access high level research, to reflect on and apply research findings and to undertake research of their own, focused on questions pertinent to their own contexts.

The ACFE Board’s ‘mechanisms’ for promoting implementation of the findings resulting from our research studies are outlined in Figure 1 below.
As Figure 1 shows, in addition to the formal research reports, we were commissioned to undertake dissemination activities. This included advice to government through briefings and workshops as well as presentations and workshops at national, state and regional conferences focussed on adult education and lifelong learning. We also provided briefings to key stakeholder groups convened by the ACFE Regional Councils in all regions.

An additional component involved the establishment of two rounds of ‘ACE Circles of Professional Research Practice’ by the ACFE Board in 2006-2007. These were designed to provide opportunities for ACE practitioners to come together to focus on the findings of the studies, to interpret, reflect upon and then apply the research outcomes to their own contexts. Funding was provided to engage a project manager and to pay for practitioner-researchers’ time. We (the researchers) were funded to provide mentoring, in relation to the studies completed by the University of Melbourne, to 27 practitioner-researchers from 25 ACE providers, to assist them to carefully examine the research findings of the two studies in relation to their own contexts and to design and complete their own small research projects. We provided professional development workshops, materials, email and telephone support and facilitated online discussions and live online conferencing sessions.

The ‘Springboard Demonstration Grants’ were offered in 2007-2008 by the
ACFE Board to further stimulate practitioner-research and development of effective models for innovative ACE practice, in particular to produce improved outcomes for the prioritised under-served learner groups. Drawing on their ‘ACE Circles’ experiences and a broader range of research and again guided and supported by our mentoring, 10 practitioner-researchers based in 7 providers completed 5 projects over 12 months designing and testing the effectiveness of pilot programs.

**Outcomes**

Overall, the ACE Circles fostered engagement in research by practitioners well beyond the small amount of funding that was provided for their time. Colleagues were drawn in to support that work. McIntyre (2008) in his formal evaluation of the ACE Circles concluded that the Circles were not only cost-effective in terms of the practitioner–researcher contribution of time and the outcomes they achieved, but there was also a ‘multiplier effect’. Some ACE organisations contributed extra funds for more staff to be involved and ‘many hours of professional development were generated beyond the Circles themselves’ (p.5).

The support of the employing ACE organisations was critical for the success of the initiative. The larger organisations, some of which were leaders in organisational innovation were well placed to provide support. Where the organisation was small and staffed mainly by volunteers, the practitioner-researcher relied on their own resources and was more likely to feel isolated. Consequently, we targeted higher levels of support to these participants.

The success of the ACE Circles initiative was attributed in the external evaluation (McIntyre, 2008) to a series of key factors. The use of experienced managers in leading ACE organisations, to establish and manage the Circles was important. A mentoring role for professional researchers who had completed the research studies that formed the basis for the practitioner projects was clearly defined and funded. This enabled us to effectively support the practitioner-researchers in establishing ‘robust research frameworks’ and developing any new skills that they required to successfully complete their projects. Our focus on practical relevance in the design of the research questions and methodologies also was important.

The evaluation also found that the structured activities that we facilitated during whole day meetings of Circle participants were valuable, as they ensured clear expectations and focussed involvement. We found that these activities also fostered effective interactions and the building of collegiality between the practitioner-researchers that promoted their support for each other between meetings, within live online conferencing sessions and through telephone calls and emails. They shared resources and ideas, provided feedback and encouragement to each other.
The Springboard Demonstration project involved selected participants with experience of the ACE Circles engaged for longer and on higher level ‘demonstration projects’. It offered more funding and placed greater demands on their time and expertise but also provided them, their organisations and the wider ACE community with more valuable outcomes. This project pushed many of the participants out of their ‘comfort zone’, but in doing so, it increased their research skills and knowledge, their confidence, their sense of achievement and for some, their aspirations to undertake higher degrees.

A substantial report was completed for each of the five projects and these will shortly be published online with links to the authors for assistance with implementation of the innovations that have been developed and tested. The participants reported that the Springboard Demonstration Project strengthened the research culture within their organisations, generated new ideas for courses and for teaching including through the use of technology. It provided their organisations with the networks, partnerships and opportunities they needed to grow and become a sustainable business and strengthened their capacity to respond to learning needs in their communities. Each of the 10 participants plans to proceed further with their research and innovations.

**Conclusion**

‘All research, however large-scale, brilliantly conceived, executed and communicated, needs to be actively interpreted by users for their own context’ (Cordingley 2008, p.49). The process of interpreting research and transforming that knowledge into contextualised practice is a complex one. While practitioners clearly interpret research findings that are presented to them, based on their experience and expertise, an interactive relationship between researchers, managers and practitioners (Nutley et al, 2008) better facilitates development of effective research-based innovations and processes, and instruments for evaluating their effectiveness and wider application.

Adequate funding for practitioner-researcher time and for our mentoring role and the creation of a ‘community of practitioner researchers’ were vital for individual growth and high quality outcomes. This accords with Belzer’s (2007) view that to maximise success, practitioner research needs to attain ‘…a level of intensity in terms of its duration, creation of a community of teacher researchers, facilitator support, and frequency of meetings’ (p.687).

With the Victorian policy context, the ACFE Board’s initiatives focussed on practitioners have been fruitful. McIntyre’s (2008, p.6) evaluation of the Circles initiative concluded that it was an

… effective catalyst for educational innovation and organisational development in a way that is appropriate to community-owned and managed organisations, demonstrating how change, supported by
research-based public policy frameworks, can be achieved in a coherent way.

References


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