

Schools, vocational education and training
and partnerships: Capacity-building in
rural and regional communities

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVER

Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in two support documents: *Schools, vocational education and training and partnerships: Capacity-building in rural and regional communities—Literature review* and *Schools, vocational education and training and partnerships: Capacity-building in rural and regional communities—Case study descriptions*. These documents can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1686.html>>.

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

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

ISBN 1 921169 89 3 print edition

ISBN 1 921169 95 8 web edition

TD/TNC 86.13

Published by NCVER

ABN 87 007 967 311

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Foreword

This research was undertaken under the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation program, a national research program managed by NCVET and funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training on behalf of the Australian Government and State and Territory Governments.

The project was based on Objective 3 of the national VET strategy for 2004–2010 *Shaping our future*, which states that ‘communities and regions will be strengthened economically and socially through learning and employment’ and in response to the national research priority of the role of vocational education and training (VET) in building economic and social capital in regions and communities. Several key streams of work have been identified in relation to this objective, including regional segmentation, indicators and performance measures, and partnerships, with this research addressing the latter stream.

Rural and regional schools are becoming increasingly involved in vocational education and training. This often occurs through schools developing partnerships with registered VET providers, industry groups and/or local employers, which present both opportunities and challenges for everyone involved. This report uses case studies from seven rural and regional areas to look at the impact of schools and VET in regard to building community capacity. In particular, the research explores how communities with successful school–VET partnerships *act* to utilise and address the diverse and unique features specific to their communities.

The report is directed at policy-makers concerned with young people, rural or regional development, school–VET partnerships and community capacity-building and viability. It is designed to provide a practical guide to other rural and regional communities who wish to create and/or review and strengthen their school–VET partnership.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director NCVET

Readers interested in the topic of VET in regional and rural Australia are referred to a number of other projects in this area:

- ✧ Stimson, R, Baum, S, Mangan, J, Gellecum, Y, Shyy, T & Yigitcanlar, T 2004, *Analysing spatial patterns in the characteristics of work, employment and skills in Australia’s capital cities and across its regional cities and towns: Modelling community opportunity and vulnerability*, University of Queensland, Brisbane.
- ✧ Billett, S, Clemans, A & Seddon, T 2005, *Forming, developing and sustaining social partnerships*, NCVET, Adelaide.
- ✧ Allison, J, Gorringer, S & Lacey, J 2006, *Building learning communities: Partnerships, social capital and VET performance*, NCVET, Adelaide.
- ✧ Waterhouse, P, Virgona, C & Brown, R 2006, *Creating synergies: Local government facilitating learning and development through partnerships*, NCVET, Adelaide.

When searching VOCED (the UNESCO/NCVET international database for technical and VET research <<http://www.voced.edu.au>>), the following keywords will help you find other material of interest: partnerships; young people; capacity-building; social and economic capital; rural and regional communities.

Contents

Key messages	6
Executive summary	7
Context	11
Research purpose	11
Issues identified in the literature	11
Research questions	17
Methodology	18
Research design	18
Case study sites	20
Case study analysis	21
Limitations	21
Findings	23
Models, processes and local contexts—finding a fit	23
Creating and maintaining successful partnerships	26
Evidence of benefits	30
The role of leadership	33
Student experiences	34
Transferability: Implementing the learning in new contexts	36
Implications for policy and practice	38
Choosing models to respond to community needs	38
Organisational cross-cultural work in VET	39
Special needs of rural and remote schools	40
References	42
Support document details	44
Tables	
1 Research participants	20
2 Indicators of change for types of ‘capital’ in the case study sites	33

Key messages

This report uses case studies from seven rural and regional areas to examine the impact of schools and vocational education and training (VET) on building community capacity.

- ✧ Rural and regional communities use at least three different models to organise school–VET partnerships.
 - ◆ Regional communities may use: a *regional cluster* model based on collaboration and characterised by the central coordination of student needs and industry resources and/or a *specialised program* model that targets students with specific needs and/or has a particular industry focus.
 - ◆ Rural communities are more likely to use a *whole-of-community* model that attempts to engage many community members in a joint effort to respond to the broad range of students’ needs.
- ✧ The success of VET programs in these areas is dependent upon the capacity of a rural or regional school–VET partnership to: analyse and respond to identified community issues; harness community resilience (a ‘can do’ approach); connect the program with shared community values; and develop a shared purpose that includes a range of community representatives.
- ✧ School–VET partnerships can provide a positive way of keeping students engaged in school, as community work placement can refocus students’ understandings of why they are at school.
- ✧ School–VET partnerships can assist rural and regional communities to keep more young people in the community, preventing their moving to metropolitan or larger regional areas. This contributes to community capacity-building and viability and maintains or strengthens economic capital.
- ✧ Where schools and/or their students have low credibility with local business, school–VET partnerships can be a pathway to the creation of stronger community relationships. Further, school–VET partnerships with a social justice agenda can provide work-related networks and connections for some of the most disadvantaged students in the school community. In both contexts the degree to which marginalised individuals or groups are included within the existing social capital in the community is increased, with a corresponding increase in social capital overall. Social capital refers to the network of relationships and skills which result from community and civic activities.
- ✧ The capacity for young people to directly contribute to school–VET partnerships has not been fully explored in programs. Young people are usually passive rather than active participants in school–VET partnerships. Although most partnership decisions are made with the benefits for young people in mind, they usually occur on behalf of, rather than with, young people.
- ✧ Providers of VET programs to small and isolated rural/remote communities must demonstrate flexibility in content, delivery and policies, in terms of class sizes and curriculum content, to ensure that the needs of young people have priority over administrative convenience.

Executive summary

Purpose of the project

Rural and regional schools are becoming increasingly involved in vocational education and training (VET). This often occurs as a result of schools developing partnerships with registered VET providers, industry groups and/or local employers; these partnerships present both opportunities and challenges for everyone involved. Recent National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) research suggests that partnership success and sustainability may rely on the ability of communities to build and strengthen their social and economic capital. How do communities do this? In the context of this research project, how do school–VET partnership members:

- ✧ analyse local issues and harness the unique features of their communities?
- ✧ develop models and processes that work for all partnership members?
- ✧ utilise the partnership to make a real difference to young people’s educational and work opportunities and thus contribute to community viability?

This project focused on successful examples of school–VET partnerships in rural and regional communities. It responded to these questions and explored how communities demonstrated the building or strengthening of social and economic capital, as reported by school–VET partnership members, and how different stakeholders experienced the partnership. It was designed to provide a practical guide to other rural and regional communities who wish to create and/or review and strengthen their school–VET partnership.

Background and context

Social capital is concerned with networks, relationships, and levels of trust and reciprocity among community members who, in supporting them, demonstrate their personal capabilities. Valued and mutually beneficial partnerships are fundamental to the notion of social capital. Because education can play an active role in contributing positively to the quality of life of community members, school–VET partnerships provide opportunities to both draw upon and contribute to social capital within a community. A number of researchers argue that successful VET outcomes in rural and regional Australia are based on the cohesion, trust and social capital that partnership members develop through active and committed involvement in achieving a shared goal (Falk 2000; Kilpatrick 2003). They also require an *enabling leadership* approach (Johns 2003; Johns et al. 2001); this supports a wider group of community or partnership members to take up leadership roles throughout the process, which can reduce the likelihood of project breakdown if a key person leaves.

The state and national policy context for VET has shifted to include social capital concepts. Recent policy documents include terms such as *partnerships*, along with *networks*, *skills and knowledge* or how to access them, *community relationships*, *trust* and *support*. These are reflected in state policies to varying extents. The embedded assumption within policy documents is that social capital is the *glue* that bonds people and holds such partnerships together (Kearns 2004).

Research process

Three rural and four regional schools, perceived as operating successful school–VET partnerships, were selected as case studies from three states. During the first visit to each case study site the research design was discussed. At a second longer visit, more detailed information from a broad range of partnership members was gathered. In analysing the information collected, each case study was considered separately, and outcomes were linked to the relevant literature. The resulting outcomes from each of the case studies were then compared to develop an overall picture of both the similarities and diversities of rural and regional school–VET partnerships, and the implications for policy and practice.

Findings

Three different models were used to organise school–VET partnerships in the rural and regional communities included in the research. A *regional cluster* or *specialised program* model was found in regional communities, while a *whole-of-community* model was characteristic of rural communities. Regardless of model adopted, both rural and regional communities needed to respond to common community issues, such as retaining young people in the school and in the local area, responding to local skills shortages, encouraging local businesses to support young people, improving young people’s work networks, and creating opportunities for young people to contribute positively to the community.

Addressing distinct community issues through different models

In a *regional cluster model*, schools within the region establish a formal agreement and are serviced by a central VET coordinating body. That body, through the diversity of its industry and school representation and the comprehensiveness of its networks, is well placed to identify and coordinate the needs of local industry and student interest and capabilities. It is able to draw on and strengthen the social capital residing within the various local communities and across the wider region to make a variety of VET options available to all participating students. The regional cluster model is dependent on a shared valuing of and commitment to VET and, as a result, a willingness to pool resources to achieve mutual goals. Creating a solid structure, engaging business and industry across the region, and embedding VET within a system of interrelationships helps to sustain the partnership through transition periods when people may leave or do not perform according to expectations. The pooling of resources and student numbers through a central organisational base helps to maintain a wide variety of VET programs for students across the region.

A *specialised program* model has a targeted population and/or industry focus within a local area. Obviously, the specific focus may vary from region to region. It makes a dedicated effort to address the needs of young people for whom existing educational options do not work—whether they are regular schooling or VET options—and who are excluded from a community’s existing social systems (and, therefore, capital). The initiative may be led by a school or another community entity, with the school as an active and main partner, but usually involves a core group of community, VET and industry personnel who meet regularly to guide and monitor the program.

In a *whole-of-community* model there is an active and persistent effort to engage, as far as possible, a broad spectrum of community members in a joint approach to respond to the broad range of young people’s needs. The model seeks to include everyone by considering options for young people who are alienated from or have left from school, those who might leave, and those who will remain at school but for whom access to alternative experiences will be beneficial for their future education and/or employment. This model is usually driven from a school base, with active community engagement and support. It needs to draw on both internal and external resources to create program options for young people, and to embrace flexible delivery of training, with strong business support for individuals or small groups of young people.

Achieving success and commitment in rural and regional areas

The school–VET partnerships in this research often operated with uncertain funding and inconsistent approaches to formal planning. They depended on four other factors to achieve success and commitment. First, they identified their community’s specific issues and designed programs that directly responded to them—a community-first rather than program-first approach. Second, they harnessed community resilience; that is, the creativity, adaptability, driving values and survival strategies of the community. This occurred by connecting to the existing community values or beliefs underpinning the partnership and creating a ‘can do’ attitude to shared issues, rather than feeling overwhelmed and powerless. These included values such as pride in self-sufficiency, being committed to contributing positively to the community, a shared sense of ‘responsibility for looking after our young people’, a spirit of generosity, a willingness to ‘do the right thing’ and ‘give the kids a go’. This involved seeing young people as resources, because ‘what is good for young people is good for the community’.

Third, they worked hard to maintain a shared purpose for the partnership, despite different needs and desired benefits. On the whole, this was providing *real* experiences for young people in *real* workplace situations, resulting in *real* outcomes such as jobs, or in some situations, clear educational and vocational pathways. Fourth, they implemented a model of distributed or enabling leadership: rather than investing all leadership roles in one person, they encouraged and supported a range of partnership members to take on different leadership roles, so that leadership could be systemically embedded in the community.

Barrier to success in rural and regional areas

In managing school–VET partnerships, rural and regional communities face many barriers similar to those of their urban counterparts. However, several issues are more prominent for rural and regional communities. The economies of scale work against them, as they still need to cover the full range of leadership and specialist tasks but with a smaller staff size. This means that communities need to draw on goodwill and personal commitment to participate in school–VET partnerships. Transport time and costs can be significant to students accessing VET courses, training blocks or structured work placements not based in the local community. Local employment options may also be limited in small towns, or when regional towns are dominated by a single industry. While this situation also applies in urban areas, problems with organisational cross-sectoral differences between rural and regional schools and VET providers can have a greater negative effect, as they may be limited in VET provider options.

Evidence of benefits

Given these barriers, school–VET partnerships need to bring significant social and economic benefits to rural and regional communities for partner members to remain committed to them. The benefits reported were numerous and included developing *collective ownership* of the program and young people in it. The regular interaction, shared values and vision, and trust that were required to achieve collective ownership immediately contributed to social capital. The partnership itself became a strong lobby group in its capacity of leveraging funds and support to maintain its work, thus contributing to economic capital.

Schools retained more young people in education and supported them more effectively into career pathways. Students had positive experiences in workplaces and those who were socially and economically disadvantaged were exposed to networks previously unavailable to them. Furthermore, they became part of the community’s social capital, access to which they had previously been denied. Industry and business gained employees who arrived with skills, experience and an appreciation of the work attitudes that employers valued. This increased the chances of young people keeping their jobs and enabled employers and industry to plan more effectively for the future. Young people stayed in communities and therefore invested in the local economy by buying houses and cars, and choosing to raise their families there.

Student experiences

Overall, students had positive experiences in the programs offered through their school–VET partnerships. Young people gained access to educational options that were more attractive, relevant and took them somewhere; for some, it minimised or ended their experiences of unemployment and reduced their marginalisation in the community. They gained skills, networks and confidence and believed that the program helped them to feel a stronger and more respected member of the community. Many students reported that the program, through better work opportunities, helped them to stay in their communities, close to family and friend networks. For some, it helped build some confidence in their town.

There were limited opportunities for young people to participate in the design and monitoring of programs run by the school–VET partnership, or be seen as full members of that partnership. Although young people appreciated what the partnership had done for them, there were certainly some who were keen to see stronger youth participation.

What does this mean for rural and regional communities?

Adopting a model for a community’s school–VET partnership is a strategic process. The partnership members need to customise the model so that it responds directly to the distinct issues that a community faces—it must achieve community ‘fit’. It needs to be a process that is driven by the community rather than by a VET program.

School–VET partnerships have stronger outcomes and make smoother progress when the specific expertise that different partnership members bring to it is respected and viewed as an opportunity for sharing and learning. This requires effective cross-sectoral work at the organisational level, particularly between schools and VET providers, such as technical and further education (TAFE) institutes. For rural and regional communities, there needs to be a strong focus on flexibility in the delivery of VET options, an appreciation of the challenges that young people face if returning to education (there may be no other local options if this does not work), and accountability for reporting back on progress for students undertaking school-based new apprenticeships.

Small rural and remote communities have special needs in running VET programs. They may have limited access to VET providers and courses, and providers may have a poor understanding of the complexity and uniqueness of the community environment and that this requires adaptation of curriculum. They can experience a high level of staff turnover, so sustainability of programs is a major issue. An effective school–community management structure is required to address negative impacts arising from the movement of staff (for example, loss of expertise, history and relationships) and to develop high levels of community participation and a strong sense of local ownership.

Research purpose

This project focused on the real-life application of social capital concepts in partnerships between schools and the vocational education and training (VET) sector which, as partnership members have reported, demonstrate success in building social and economic capital in rural communities and regions. It:

- ✧ outlines and analyses the models and processes implemented by three rural and four regional communities
- ✧ highlights the factors that shaped their decision-making in finding an appropriate *fit* between models, processes and local contexts
- ✧ describes how the different stakeholders experienced the partnership.

In particular, the research explores how communities with successful school–VET partnerships *act* to utilise and address the diverse and unique features specific to their communities.

Issues identified in the literature

Capacity-building and ‘capital’

Capacity-building

Capacity-building starts from the position that people have some ability to manage in their current situations, but need to be better resourced so they are more able to solve their own problems. The focus is on acknowledging existing abilities and strengthening them so that they are able to tackle issues more comprehensively and effectively. It involves bringing together the different groups of people in a community to develop mutual goals, pool resources, advocate to bring in resources they do not yet have, and develop strategies for sustaining the outcomes of their joint work. Although mutual goals are developed, people may have *different* reasons for wanting to achieve these goals (McKnight 1995). The concept of capacity-building has increasingly entered the realm of public health, education and rural development in Australia. For example, it is maintained that:

Capacity-building is constructed as externally or internally initiated processes designed to help individuals and groups associated with rural Australia to appreciate and manage their changing circumstances, with the objective of improving the stock of human, social, financial, physical and natural capital in an ethically defensible way. (Macadam et al. 2004, p.ix)

Definitions and forms of capital

Capacity-building involves strengthening different forms of ‘capital’ (Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation 2004), of which social capital is one. However, it is not mutually exclusive in relation to the other forms of capital.

- ✧ *Human* capital relates to individual capabilities of community members (however that community is defined).

- ❖ *Social* capital is concerned with networks, relationships, and levels of trust and reciprocity among community members that support them to demonstrate their personal capabilities. Valued and mutually beneficial partnerships are fundamental to the notion of social capital. Social capital both contributes to and is dependent on human capital being fostered.
- ❖ *Physical* capital is about infrastructure, for example, buildings and equipment.
- ❖ *Financial* capital means the goods or services that people produce, including ‘knowledge’, not just things.
- ❖ *Natural* capital refers to natural resources that people use to sustain their existence, whether they are renewable or non-renewable (although sometimes these resources are collapsed into physical capital).

The last three—physical, financial and natural—can also be termed ‘economic capital’. Social capital and economic capital are interdependent: social capital will generate economic capital, and economic capital can resource social capital. When applied to the context of this research, health, human and education services and their physical location (infrastructure) are forms of economic capital in rural and regional communities, as is the presence of viable business enterprises. The operation of these services and businesses depends on the nature and amount of human capital among community members. Interactions between community members as they engage with and support each other through services, businesses and community events reflect social capital.

Two strands in the debate on social capital

There is an ongoing debate regarding definitions of social capital; this is driven by two different theoretical positions and concerns about measurement. In the early 1980s in France, Pierre Bourdieu defined social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition’ (1985, cited in Pope 2003, pp.1–2). He was focused on benefits gained through people’s participation in groups and their ability to create resources through these social interactions. His definition proposed two parts to social capital: first, social relationships enable individuals to access the resources of other people in their network, and second, the amount and quality of the resources that are accessed or created. He focused on how group members are affected by the economic context in which they find themselves. The opportunity for all to profit creates solidarity and a reason for relationships to develop, but the resources are for collective benefit, not just individual benefit.

At a similar time in the United States of America, but independently of Bourdieu, James Coleman proposed a functional view of social capital. ‘A variety of entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain action of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure’ (1988, cited in Pope 2003, p.2). This emphasises groups of people who share a common concern, build mutual trust and use their networks to support each other’s activities—individuals draw on ‘collective capital’ to maximise personal benefits. An economic-rationalist flavour is combined with valuing a self-interested individualism and belief that people make decisions to participate based on free will. The ability to develop trust that the other partners will reciprocate and act on social obligation is very important for this to work.

The differences in definition between these two authors are important because any measurement using the Bourdieu definition would have to include an understanding of the material conditions that drive the formation of social processes, whilst an analysis using the Coleman approach needs only to consider motivation at the individual (or aggregated individual) level. (Pope 2003, p.2)

Robert Putnam in the United States and Eva Cox in Australia have built on Coleman’s definition and developed measures of ‘collective social capital’ based on aggregates of individual social capital, in terms of trust, social inclusion, membership of formal networks and community groups, levels of

civic engagement etc. Pope (2003) notes four criticisms of this approach: social capital indicators lack clear definition; collective social capital is not the same as individual social capital; the presence of social capital may not always result in positive outcomes as it may exclude certain groups; and solutions based on an individualised concept of social capital may not work or may reinforce inequity. For example, in rural areas it could mean the state or nation expects that their close-knit social and support ties could compensate for a lack of employment opportunities and economic investments.

Although Bourdieu's definition has been used to develop measures for social capital, there is an emphasis on considering the historical, social and economic conditions of the community or area under study. 'Social relations are complex and cannot be quantified simply by using individual indicators, because they are not merely the property of individuals. An examination of social capital using this definition therefore requires more qualitative methodologies' (Pope 2003, p.4).

This research project aimed to provide a descriptive account of social and economic capital as reported by participants in local school–VET partnerships. It considered the social and economic context of the rural or regional location and how the partnership, in line with Bourdieu's emphasis, responded to that context. It was not focused on measurement of social or economic capital with predetermined tools; such measurements can produce valuable information, but require a different methodology and focus from that proposed in this research and would need to engage with the above debates and draw on the considerable body of work on community and social indicators, such as outlined by Salvaris (2000).

Aspects of social capital

Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) proposed a revised definition of social capital based on their extensive research of social capital and learning in rural and regional communities.

Social capital is the product of social interactions with the potential to contribute to the social, civic or economic wellbeing of a community-of-common-purpose. The interactions draw on *knowledge* and *identity resources* and simultaneously use and build stores of social capital. The nature of the social capital depends on various qualitative dimensions of the interactions in which it is produced, such as the quality of the internal-external interactions, the historicity, futurity, reciprocity, trust and the shared values and norms.

(Falk & Kilpatrick 2000, pp.103–4, emphasis added)

The term 'knowledge resources' includes the knowledge of how to gain advice and resources and where to go to obtain this information. 'Identity resources' refers to self-confidence, trust, shared values and vision, and commitment to the community. Learning takes place through people's interactions, drawing on both sets of resources, which results in mutually beneficial outcomes and the development of reciprocity (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000). In this way, social capital is simultaneously built and used as a result of the interactions between knowledge and identity resources. Falk and Kilpatrick also emphasise that leadership is critical if communities are to benefit from their stores of social capital; that is, through their efforts to renew or strengthen communities through community development processes (see section below).

Although this research project noted the particular aspects of social or economic capital strengthened in the case study sites, the emphasis was on how this occurred, and the role that VET played in this. There was specific emphasis on how social capital was drawn upon and/or strengthened, as it illuminates how school–VET partnerships successfully met the mutual goals of schools and local communities in rural and regional areas through their cooperative action, and what strategies can be transferred to other contexts.

School–VET partnerships in rural and regional communities

At the beginning of this decade it was claimed that:

There is an urgent need to identify models of best practice in the area of regional economic development, demonstrating how education and training provision can be linked to growth

industries, the local economy, and new civic initiatives that offer employment to young people in rural areas. (Mulraney & Turner 2001, p.151)

It was also argued that successful principles of regional economic and social development include: ensuring young people have a voice that is heard by powerbrokers and acted upon so they feel empowered; focusing on social capital; and having community organisations that are reliable and willing to build partnerships, whether business or social (Mulraney & Turner 2001).

Building social capital through VET in regional and rural areas

An assumption underpinning the idea of school–VET partnerships and schools as active players in the development of social capital is the role and place of education within a community. From a narrow perspective, education’s mandate is the education of students and provision of educational services. In contrast, a holistic perspective argues that education and the provision of educational services have observable and direct effects on local communities, in terms of confidence and quality of life of community members. To this extent, education is indeed a critical component in local development. This is reinforced by recognising that schools are not merely ‘way stations’ for a state-provided service, but rather their contribution is intertwined with: ‘aspects of community life’ (Squires 2001, p.6). This, in turn, is seen to be ‘directly related to the ability of the schools to harness, develop and nurture human capital and engage in productive capacity-building’ (p.16).

Kilpatrick (2003) found that:

VET was most effective in building social capital and learning communities where there was attention to customising or targeting education and training provision to local needs. The key to matching provision with local needs, particularly in the more rural and remote areas within the study sites, was collaboration and partnerships. (Kilpatrick 2003, p.1)

Based on research into the impact of VET on social and economic wellbeing in regional Australia, Falk (2000) stated that, ‘strong cohesion, trust and social capital underpinned all *successful* VET outcomes’ (p.10, emphasis added). Kilpatrick (2003) argued that rural communities have a higher level of social capital than their urban counterparts because they tend to be culturally homogeneous, with overlapping social and work-related networks. Yet, social capital does not equate with social inclusion, and rural/regional communities are culturally diverse. It is possible that, although an area appears to demonstrate a high level of social capital, this may only be evident for a proportion of the population.

Developing, nurturing and sustaining partnerships

A repeated theme in research and theoretical papers on school–VET programs is the significance of investing effort in developing, nurturing and sustaining partnerships in successful programs. To be effective and demonstrate social capital, partnerships must exist in more than name—they must be vibrant and active and include several players from a local community or region, including other schools (Country Education Project & Youth Research Centre 2001).

In their report on social partnerships and their relevance to VET, Seddon and Billett (2004) described two forms of social partnerships with different compositions of people or groups and motivation for existing. ‘Community partnerships’ are formed to address local issues or problems and grow out of community concerns and commitments. By contrast, agencies external to local communities often initiate ‘enacted social partnerships’, although with the intention of developing and/or supporting particular functions within those communities.

In later work, Seddon and Clemans (2004) extended this to include a third form: ‘Negotiated partnerships ... [are] formed between partners with reciprocal goals to secure a service or support and require effective negotiation of interests and agendas’ (p.3). The partnership itself is necessary in order to provide services or gain required support. They also reported that partnerships are not simply one type or another, but may operate concurrently or sequentially through the life of the partnership. Regardless of type, all partnerships have a common need to negotiate and develop

shared goals that they can meet collectively in an effective and mutual manner, defined by them as 'building relationships of trust' or 'partnership work.'

Leadership for partnership development

Rather than the traditional conceptions of leadership relying on the vision, motivation and facilitation of a main person; that is, the principal in the case of schools (Country Education Project & Youth Research Centre 2001; Falk 2000; Malley, Frigo & Robinson 1999), research on school–VET partnerships advocates a different form of leadership. Although the principal is critical to the process, not all leadership roles should necessarily fall to him/her. This different form of leadership is referred to as *enabling leadership* and is defined as 'leadership which facilitates others to come together to create visions and plan futures, inspires commitment and action by enabling people to solve problems, and builds broad-based leadership involvement' (Johns et al. 2001a, p.3).

A key feature of *enabling leadership* is supporting a wider group of community or partnership members to take up leadership roles throughout the process; that is, distributing the leadership. This form of leadership is viewed as contributing very strongly to social capital (Johns 2003; Johns et al. 2001a). Such an approach to leadership can reduce the likelihood of project breakdown with the loss of a key person, as there are sufficient energy, skills and commitment among the partners to continue down the path they have established. In this way, leadership is embedded and system-wide, rather than individually situated.

Benefits of school–VET partnerships

School–VET partnerships provide benefits to schools, young people, communities and business (Figgis 2000; Johns et al. 2001b; Kilpatrick, Bell & Kilpatrick 2000; Malley, Frigo & Robinson 1999; Misko 2001). When VET pathways, in combination with locally supported work placements, are designed to direct students into local employment, students are retained in schooling for longer and are more likely to transition directly into local jobs or apprenticeships rather than leave communities. They 'are more likely to indicate their intention to live in a rural location during their working life than those who do not undertake a VET program' (Johns et al. 2004, p.6). These benefits are usually greater for young men than young women, as there is a lower uptake of VET by young women, and local employment is often in traditionally male-dominated fields (Johns et al. 2004).

There are also specific benefits for business (Figgis 2000), including:

- ✧ an increase in productivity of existing staff and through student contributions
- ✧ an enhancement of the company's skills base through the training that staff gain or the rethinking of their role and existing work practices
- ✧ more efficient and effective recruitment
- ✧ community recognition for their contributions
- ✧ improved public image
- ✧ employer and staff personal satisfaction that has positive effects on attitude and motivation
- ✧ the positive impact of all of these things on their 'bottom line'.

Although businesses often contribute in-kind support and provide work placements, most administrative support does, or is certainly expected to, come from schools or entities established to take on this role (Figgis 2000; Malley, Frigo & Robinson 1999). Therefore schools bear most of the direct costs, absorbing these through central or grant-based funding.

Student voices

A notable absence in much of the literature is student voice, although concepts of 'youth participation' and, more generally, 'youth development' are frequently invoked (for example, Johns et al. 2001b). Many research studies include young people as participants, noting their reported

satisfaction, experience, outcomes and the future pathways they take. By contrast, there was limited discussion and little or no evidence of young people's active participation in designing and monitoring school–VET partnerships. They were more often portrayed in a passive position of receiving the program and gaining their active participation experience *within* the program. Although participation at this level is of clear benefit to young people, that is, they often report this is the case and it is often one of the main reasons for a program's existence, another opportunity is being missed here. As Ausyouth (2002) points out:

Participation in decision-making can extend opportunities for building teamwork and leadership skills, strengthening self-confidence and inspiring [young people] to make further contributions to their communities. Willingness to be involved in decision-making processes provides a basis for contributing to active citizenship and participation in political processes. Young people learn to advocate for themselves and on behalf of others.

(Ausyouth 2002, p.29)

National policies for VET and rural education

Social capital concepts have entered the language of Australian national policy and framework documents for vocational education and training in recent years. Many of the principles, objectives, strategies, and desired outcomes in these documents use terms such as *partnerships* repeatedly, along with *networks*, *skills and knowledge* or how to access them, *community relationships*, *trust* and *support*. These are reflected in state policies to varying extents.

For example, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs clearly established the importance of partnerships with the community in the implementation of VET in Schools. This is most evident in the policy directions and implementation documents under the New Framework for Vocational Education in Schools (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2001a, 2001b). Community partnerships were identified as one of the six key elements of the framework. There was the recognition that the 'centrality of partnerships is a further indication that increasingly learning takes place in a variety of ways and in a variety of settings ... the advancement of this learning is possible only as a result of the establishment and development of genuine, local partnerships between those concerned with youth' (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2001a, p.25).

In response to the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001) *Footprints to the future* report, which focused on young people's transitions from schooling to further education, training and employment, the Ministerial Declaration, *Stepping forward—improving pathways for all young people*, was made and accompanied by an action plan (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2002a, 2002b). Part of the vision was that 'young people benefit and flourish through sustaining networks of family, friends and community'. National policy work specifically directed to rural and remote areas included the National Framework for Rural and Remote Education (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2002c), which named 'environments formed through effective community relationships and partnerships' as one of six essential enablers for quality education in rural and/or remote areas.

The more recent Career and Transition Services Framework (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2003) being implemented in all states and territories expands upon the concepts and principles in *Stepping forward*. It operationalises them into a set of related activities, products and services that will be available to all young people within their local areas through 'local community partnerships'. The embedded assumption is that social capital will be the *glue* that bonds people and holds such partnerships together (Kearns 2004).

An extended literature review, including information on the debate about definitions and measures of social capital, is found in the support document entitled *Schools, vocational education and training and partnerships: Capacity-building in rural and regional communities—Literature review*, which can be found at the NCVER website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1686.html>>.

Research questions

The overarching research question informing this project was: *How do successful school–VET partnerships contribute to community capacity-building in rural and regional areas, as demonstrated through reported change in social and economic capital?* Sub-questions were developed to support this specific question and guide the process of inquiry and analysis. They are categorised as follows:

History and context

- ✧ What are the characteristics of the communities and regions in which these successful partnerships are occurring?
- ✧ What led to the development of the partnerships?
- ✧ How have key players analysed and responded to the issues in their local community in developing the partnership (this includes both facilitators and barriers to successful partnerships and good social and economic development)? How is this analysis reflected in choices about models and processes/strategies?
- ✧ What is the role of policy (both formal and informal) in facilitating partnerships at different levels, including nationally and at the state level and regionally and locally?

Partnerships

- ✧ Who are the key players in successful school–VET partnerships in rural or regional areas?
- ✧ How are these key players recognised and included in the partnership?
- ✧ Why do key players get involved—what are their agenda and desired outcomes?
- ✧ Why do key players maintain a commitment to these partnerships?
- ✧ What do the key players believe defines a successful partnership in rural and regional areas? How is this demonstrated in their community?
- ✧ What do the key players name as successes in the partnership? How are these shared with and experienced by the community?
- ✧ What do key players name as barriers in the partnership? Who deals with them and how?
- ✧ What evidence do key players provide about the benefits of partnerships (for example, build community capacity and contribute to social and economic development)? What sources of information are used to support this evidence (including historical and comparative)?

Leadership

- ✧ Who plays a leadership role in facilitating partnerships? Why and how does this occur?

Student experience

- ✧ What do these partnerships mean for young people in their area?
- ✧ What place has ‘student voice’ through youth participation had in the process of initiating and developing partnerships?
- ✧ How then are students recruited into programs; that is, streaming based on ability, personal encouragement, self-selection, or targeted selection based on attitudes and skills?

The final interview guides used at the preliminary and main site visits are in the appendix of the support document entitled *Schools, vocational education and training and partnerships: Capacity-building in rural and regional communities—Case study descriptions* (<<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1686.html>>).

Methodology

Research design

The research combined a literature review and analysis with case studies, which were based on a naturalistic or constructive inquiry methodology (Erlandson et al. 1993). The individual case study reports and extended literature review are available as project support documents from the NCVET website.

Naturalistic inquiry takes a 'problem statement' and treats it as a dilemma or situation to address in order to enhance understanding of and influence everyday practice in the area of focus. It pays close attention to context, ensures that information-gathering occurs in real-world settings and emphasises a participatory approach with informants. It engages participants in designing the research process, in analysing outcomes along the way by testing out ideas or new meanings, and in gaining feedback about the how the research learning is constructed. In reporting outcomes, naturalistic inquiry researchers are obligated to 'produce a document that will allow for active participation on the part of the reader and provide the basis for developing working hypotheses that can be applied in other contexts' (Erlandson et al. 1998, p.40). This fits with the purpose of this project in providing a practical guide to other rural and regional communities who wish to create and/or review and strengthen their school-VET partnership.

The literature review focuses on three main areas:

- ✧ capacity-building and social capital to assist in identifying social capital concepts in the research outcomes
- ✧ available reports of other school-VET partnerships in rural communities which have applied social capital concepts in order to identify existing knowledge and highlight absences
- ✧ the reflection of social capital concepts in policy at national and state levels in Australia.

The initial plan was to include six case study sites to represent three regional areas (over 15 000 people) and three rural sites (under 5000 people), one each in South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia. As described below, seven case studies were included in total.

Case study site selection

Three steps were involved in identifying case study sites. First, a criteria sheet for inclusion was developed that drew on social capital concepts:

- ✧ community/business involvement in leadership and management of the VET program, for example, formal relationships with business, community and/or economic development boards or groups, including local government
- ✧ a proven track record of school/community/business partnerships (with programs or partnerships being in at least their second year of operation)
- ✧ regular communication between school, community and business about the program/partnerships

- ✧ local documentation of program/partnerships success, for example, numbers of students; sustaining students involved; re-engagement of young people in school or transitions to further education, training and/or employment; retaining young people in the community/region
- ✧ development of or progress in developing local policy to guide the program/partnerships
- ✧ community-mindedness identified at a school level (within or beyond VET program), for example, communication with community about the school and/or school–community activities, collaboration with local services and organisations
- ✧ community/business recognition of the school’s community mindedness.

Second, the local Department of Education, Science and Training in each state and state departments of education were briefed on the research and consulted about potential case study sites meeting these criteria, or regional areas that should be approached for the decision. Three to five potential sites were identified in each state and the top two preferences indicated.

Third, contact people at the preferred sites were approached, informed how they were nominated and briefed on the project; they individually considered whether they met the criteria. Once this was confirmed, they were asked to make a non-obligatory expression of interest to be involved, indicate who the key players were in their area and nominate a main contact person. During this step a request was received from the South Australian regional site to include an additional site, as it was implementing a similar program to the main case study. This was approved, since it provided an example of how a community that wants to develop or improve partnerships could transfer concepts, principles and strategies from a successful school–VET partnership—an intended outcome of the research. Finally, once ethics approvals were gained from each state department of education, sites were formally invited to be involved.

Preliminary site visits

One-day visits were coordinated at each site with the main contact person. Individual and group meetings were held with people representing the key players in each site’s local partnership (with the exception of young people and parents). During these meetings participants were briefed on the nature and purpose of the research and consulted about appropriate ways of conducting the main visit, for example, whom to speak to and how. Initial information was gathered about key players, and the history of why and how they became involved in the partnership.

Main site visits

A three-day visit was coordinated with the main contact person at each site as per the agreed outcomes of the preliminary site visit, and involved individual interviews, focus groups and observations. All relevant documentation and demographics were gathered, for example, locally produced material (media articles), strategic planning documents and reports on the development and/or outcomes of the partnership. The groups and numbers of people who participated in the case studies during both site visits are outlined in table 1; the total number of participants was 150.

Table 1: Research participants

	Case study site							Totals
	SA rural	SA regional	SA extra regional	Vic. rural	Vic. regional	WA rural	WA regional	
Principal/deputy principal	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
VET coordinator	1	1		1	1	1	1	6
Other school staff	2	1	2		3	3		11
Regional network/ education staff	2	1	1		3	1	1	9
Employer or industry person	9	7	2	4	2	2	6	32
Community member/ service provider	2	3			1	1		7
VET provider	1	4				2	1	8
Current and former student	5	7	15	4	5	8	6	50
Parent	3	1	4	1		3	3	15
New Apprenticeship Centre staff		2	1	1				4
Totals	27	28	26	12	16	22	19	150

Case study sites

Seven sites were selected, all of which agreed to participate in the research—one rural and regional site from each state and an additional regional site in South Australia, which was transferring and adapting the learning gained from the other regional site in that state. In brief, the sites were:

- ✧ South Australia—rural: *Bordertown High School*. Bordertown is located 300 km east of Adelaide. It has a population of 2400 and Bordertown High School has approximately 246 students. Bordertown is a small isolated town in the larger Limestone Coast region with a diverse economy and range of businesses and has been actively involved in VET programs for several years. The town has a strong community orientation.
- ✧ South Australia—regional: *Edward John Eyre High School, Whyalla*. Whyalla is located over 400 km north of Adelaide with a population of 24 400. The mining and engineering industries are dominant, but experiencing significant skill shortages. Unemployment is very high and school retention rates are low. Edward John Eyre High School is the senior public secondary school and has approximately 515 students. In 2003 it initiated the engineering-focused ‘Pre-Industry Program’ as a school–VET partnership
- ✧ South Australia—regional (extra): *John Pirie High School, Port Pirie*. Port Pirie is located 225 km north of Adelaide and has a population of just over 15 000. John Pirie is the only public secondary school and has a population of 639 students. It also has strong engineering and fabrication industries, combined with skill shortages, high unemployment rates and low school retention, so is developing a ‘Pathways to Engineering’ program based on the Whyalla model.
- ✧ Victoria—rural: *Mansfield Secondary College*. Mansfield is located approximately 200 km north of Melbourne at the foothills of the Alpine Region. It has a population of 3000 people in the town and about 8000 in the surrounding district. The school has 425 students and it has been actively and extensively involved in school-based new apprenticeships for some years.
- ✧ Victoria—regional: *Bairnsdale Secondary College*. Bairnsdale is located 282 km east of Melbourne in a farming district and is the regional centre for the East Gippsland region. The town has a population of 10 900. It has two secondary schools, with the Satellite Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning program being part of Bairnsdale Secondary College, but located on a separate site, which has been running since 2004.

- ✧ Western Australia—rural: *Mt Magnet District High School*. Mt Magnet is located 562 km north of Perth and has a population of 727 in a shire of 13 877 square kilometres. It is the oldest operating gold settlement in Western Australia. Mt Magnet District High School has a student population of 175 in the K–11 years. Indigenous students represent 60% of the enrolment. The VET program began in 2004. Prior to this, students who had not left to complete their schooling elsewhere would have left school at the end of Year 10 without a recognised qualification.
- ✧ Western Australia—regional: *Eastern Goldfields Senior High School*. Kalgoorlie is located 600 km east of Perth; together with its twin city, Boulder, it has a population of 30 000. While gold remains the dominant industry, it has a full range of services that support the city and other smaller centres in the wider region. Eastern Goldfields Senior High School (EGHS) is the largest secondary school in the area and has a comprehensive range of VET programs and school-based new apprenticeships as part of a ‘compact’ between regional schools that is designed to present a coordinated approach to the community and avoid unnecessary competition.

Case study analysis

Each case study was first considered separately, and comparisons and contrasts of outcomes were linked with the national and international literature on school–VET partnerships, paying particular attention to the language that reflected social capital, partnership and leadership concepts. The relationships established in the school–VET partnership and with whom and how were analysed in order to determine whether specific models could be identified, and the processes involved in these models.

The literature review provided additional options through which the case study outcomes could be analysed to consider how partnerships had acted to utilise and address the diverse and unique features of their communities. The literature raised questions such as:

- ✧ What ‘partnership development’ stage have the case study sites achieved, according to the ‘partnership life cycle’? How is this evident? How is this contributing to its success?
- ✧ What types of social partnerships do the case study sites represent?
- ✧ What strategies do they employ to advance community capacity-building?
- ✧ What strategies do they employ to monitor performance through social partnerships?
- ✧ What point in the leadership process has each case study site reached?
 - ◆ Which roles are being taken up?
 - ◆ Who is taking up these roles?
 - ◆ How is this evident?
 - ◆ How is this contributing to its success?
- ✧ What support have case study sites received from the state departments of education? How does this impact on their programs?
- ✧ Who in the community benefits most from the partnerships and who misses out? How is this apparent and what plans do partnerships have for addressing this?

The learning gained from each case study was compared across all case studies to develop a picture of similarity and diversity for rural and regional school–VET partnerships, and the implications for policy and practice.

Limitations

Although a case study approach immediately means working in a smaller number of locations and gathering detailed information at each site from a broad range of stakeholders, the available funding for the research limited the overall number of case studies that could be included. This is a

potential limitation, as it was possible that we were not exposed to a wider range of school–VET partnership models. The three main limitations in the research were as follows:

- ✧ Parental involvement was dependent on young people agreeing that they be contacted, and young people in several case studies did not have close connections with parents/guardians. Examples included young people who had been struggling to engage with school prior to the implementation of VET program. This was partly related to family problems, not having good relationships or no longer living at home. Other examples included young people who had left school early—as much as several years ago—and who were re-connecting with education after a period of unemployment or underemployment. These people were independent from their family. Despite this, parent opinions were gained in five of the seven sites.
- ✧ In some sites VET providers were not available for interview because they could not make time within their schedules, or VET delivery and assessment occurred through the school or program base and the provider’s contributions were course materials and accreditation.
- ✧ Although demographic information on the broad characteristics of case study sites was available, more specific information tracking young people’s pathways through school and on to continuing education or employment was either not directly available to the researchers, or not collected in a systematic way at local, regional or state levels in a manner useful for analysing change at a specific small rural or regional location.

Due to the combined number and range of research participants that were included, the impact of these limitations on the overall findings was minimised.

Models, processes and local contexts—finding a fit

The research identified three different models that these seven rural and regional communities used to organise a school–VET partnership. A *regional cluster* or *specialised program* model was found in regional communities, while a *whole-of-community* model was characteristic of rural communities. The main differences between the models relate to their structure, the main leadership driver, and the size and nature of their target population.

Although there are distinct community issues that one model addresses more effectively than others (noted below), each model responds to a number of shared rural and regional community issues, such as:

- ✧ retaining young people in the area by providing work-ready skills and certificates
- ✧ retaining young people in the local school(s)
- ✧ providing work-ready young people to fill skill shortages in the local area
- ✧ providing an opportunity for local businesses to support young people in the area
- ✧ providing a vehicle through which young people can positively contribute to the community through their work placements
- ✧ linking young people to work networks in their local area.

A regional cluster model

In a regional cluster model, government and non-government schools within the region come together in a compact and are serviced by a central VET coordinating body. That body, through the diversity of its industry and school representation and the comprehensiveness of its networks, is well placed to identify and coordinate the needs of local industry and student interest and capabilities. It is able to draw on and strengthen the social capital within the various local communities and across the wider region to make a variety of VET options available to all participating students. The regional cluster model is dependent on a shared valuing of and commitment to VET, and therefore, a willingness to pool resources to achieve mutual goals.

The regional cluster model is effective in reducing competition between people and agencies. It is a collaborative rather than a competitive model, one that is committed to the sharing of regional resources in improving the overall skills and knowledge of the stakeholders. It provides a mechanism through which excessive demands on local industries for places for structured workplace learning are avoided or limited, despite the number of schools in the cluster. This increases industry willingness to engage with and support school partnerships that involve VET options.

The regional school–VET partnership based in Kalgoorlie for the Eastern Goldfields region is an example of this model.

The Eastern Goldfields Regional Compact

The Eastern Goldfields VET delivery model is based on a linking and coordinating structure that services the cluster of schools, both government and non-government, within the region. The schools, their student bodies and the communities in which they are located are geographically dispersed and structurally and culturally diverse. The Vocational Education and Training in Schools Cluster Management Committee is a response to that diversity, to the needs of industry and the changing profile of post-compulsory students. It is seen as the peak body representing all stakeholders responsible for the delivery of VET in Schools in the district and is comprised of members of government and non-government organisations, schools and industry groups. All stakeholders perceive VET as essential to regional capacity-building. The cluster appoints staff to take on day-to-day coordination and leadership roles. Its coordinating and promotional role provides a central point or 'one-stop shop' for employers, students and parents who wish to engage in VET based on a workplace learning compact between government and non-government schools in the region.

A specialised program model

A specialised program model has a targeted population focus within a local area. It makes a dedicated effort to address the needs of young people for whom existing educational options do not work—whether they are regular schooling or VET options—and who are excluded from a community's existing social capital. It may be led by a school or another community entity with the school as an active and main partner, but usually involves a core group of community, VET and industry personnel who meet regularly to guide and monitor the program.

Specialised program models are particularly effective in communities where significant numbers of young people are unemployed or under-employed and have low levels of school completion, qualifications, work experience and employability skills. They provide an opportunity for marginalised young people to have a positive role and place in the community, and to have a second (maybe third or fourth) and real chance to achieve a qualification and employment when they have not been assisted by other community jobs pathways programs. Some or all partnership members are likely to share a commitment to social justice. The school–VET partnerships in Bairnsdale and Whyalla have taken this approach, but for different reasons.

The Bairnsdale Satellite Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning

Bairnsdale's Satellite Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning was designed to provide a second chance for young people who were out of school and not attached to any education or training. Forty-one students aged 14 to 17 years are currently enrolled (some after a three-year break from school) and most are on youth allowance. Seventeen are girls and 12 are Indigenous. Approximately 75% have had dealings with Juvenile Justice and the police, 50% lived independently with limited or no family support, four were young parents and seven of the young people had part-time jobs (mostly in the fast food industry and working up to 20 hours per week). The program is set up as a workplace; the young people have workplace agreements and an occupational health and safety committee. They undertake a VET certificate II in a range of areas, as well as studying in personal interest areas. All do workplace training, negotiated through a broad number of community partnerships managed and nurtured by the program coordinator and supported by a reference group made up of community education and employment services and the police. For many of the young people, it is their first experience of work and the best opportunity they have had to learn about the realities of the workplace. As these are some of the most marginalised young people in the community, they have the chance to build employment networks they have never previously had.

The Whyalla Pre-Industry Program

Whyalla's school-VET partnership was formed as an extension of a specialised program identified by the Whyalla Economic Development Board for which they gained state funding under employment development initiative funds. The program aimed to increase the number of young people available to enter the mechanical and electrical engineering fields by completing a fast-tracked pre-vocational program. It targeted young people who had been long-term unemployed, but ignored the range of barriers that would normally preclude their involvement. The Pre-Industry Program was a joint school and industry initiative that was then adopted by the board, as it was a one-semester school-based program designed to develop young people's literacy, numeracy and science skills. When completed, it helped them meet the requirements of TAFE's pre-vocational entrance exam in order to access the fast-tracked pre-vocational program. It also enabled young people to achieve their South Australian Certificate of Education. It required creating a strong partnership between the board, school, TAFE and industry, with regular meetings of the main representatives. There is strong industry engagement, with the main employer funding some of the training, and monitoring the progress of participants in both the school and TAFE components as part of their recruitment strategy for engineering traineeships and apprenticeships. This extended program could reach and engage the intended audience for the fast-tracked pre-vocational program. It addressed the range of social and personal problems these young people experienced through the greater resources and expertise of the school compared with TAFE in areas of personal and social support. This created a clash of cultures for the partnership to manage, due to different approaches to administration, curriculum, pedagogy and pastoral care.

A whole-of-community model

In a whole-of-community model, there is an active and persistent effort to engage as many members of the community as possible in a joint effort to respond to the broad range of young people's needs. The model seeks to include everyone by considering options for young people who are disengaging or have disengaged from school, those who may disengage, and young people who will remain engaged but for whom access to alternative experiences will be beneficial for their future education and/or employment. This model is usually driven from a school base, with active community engagement and support. It needs to draw on both internal and external resources to create program options for young people and to embrace flexible delivery of training with strong business support for individuals or small groups of young people.

In terms of addressing specific community issues, the whole-of-community model is effective in developing a skilled and workwise group of young people who are willing to stay and work in the local community, particularly in skills shortage areas. It also enhances any existing 'do it yourself' community attitude: schools located long distances from regional or urban-based support or options understand from experience that they cannot afford to wait for, or be overly reliant on externally initiated or provided options. Mansfield and Bordertown are two examples of this model, as the programs they provide in both VET and school-based new apprenticeships enable a wide range of young people to be involved.

Mansfield Secondary College

The Mansfield Secondary College School Charter states that all students experience work-based learning. To support this, all students are encouraged to take up a school-based new apprenticeship at Years 10, 11 or 12. Mansfield Secondary College now has over half of the students (a total of 125 students) in Years 10, 11 and 12 completing school-based new apprenticeships. However, to achieve this the school has had to develop strong relationships with the business community to locate work placements for the students. These relationships and positive outcomes have been developed over the past 12 years, such that now the businesses see the school as the employment agency and make the initial contact, as well as the school and the students finding work placements.

Bordertown High School

In Bordertown, the school–VET partnership is the result of a community- and business-driven concern to retain young people in school and in the region, enhance local viability and address the perceived over-emphasis on university entrance as the primary goal of secondary education. A broad range of businesses cooperate with the school. Employers are responsive to, supportive of and very proactive in developing program options, although the school is seen as the central hub, with strong and valued support from regional education staff. A work experience program is available for all Year 10 students and includes standard work experience weeks through the year. Custom-designed individual arrangements with employers for students at risk of disengaging from school have also been set up. From Year 10 students have VET topics as regular subject options and consider doing a school-based new apprenticeship. Although several topic areas are available, Bordertown has two particularly strong programs. One is an automotive pathways program based in a local business that assists in addressing this regional skills shortage by drawing in students from across the region, as well as locally, with the support of a private VET provider. It is in the process of becoming a nationally recognised training 'centre of excellence'. The other is a retail program supported by the regional TAFE (based two hours away), with many young people combining school-based new apprenticeship with existing part-time jobs.

In contrast, Mt Magnet is working toward a whole-of-community model, as this is the most suitable one for its community environment. All of these locations are rural communities—their size and existing social capital lend themselves to a whole-of-community model.

Mt Magnet District High School

The whole-of-community partnership model evolving in the delivery of VET at Mt Magnet has been determined, to a large extent, by the leadership shown by the school principal since 2004. This, in turn, has been shaped by a number of factors. While the school is part of the mid-west cluster of schools, the organisational centre for the cluster is a considerable distance from the school, leaving it isolated from a geographical and communication standpoint, as access to district level expertise is difficult. Accordingly, for the school principal and designated staff decision-making with regard to VET is carried out in relative isolation. From a positive perspective the informality of social interaction, which is a distinctive feature of small rural communities, has provided the base on which an approach for community support has been made with relative ease. The principal has capitalised on this informality in negotiating a number of community partnerships to participate in the introduction of a program specifically designed to address the need for a viable education and employment pathway for local youth who do not wish to, or do not have the resources to study and work elsewhere. Adapting available VET options or packages to the specific needs of their community has required a considerable investment of time from the principal and designated staff, as most resources are not developed with their situation in mind. However, as the program matures, increased numbers of students are involved and positive outcomes become more evident, the returns on this work will become more obvious and the support and engagement of the community should increase.

Creating and maintaining successful partnerships

Although different structures or models shaped the school–VET partnerships in this research, the process of creating and then maintaining successful partnerships had many similar features. All communities were hoping to gain the benefits of partnerships outlined by Kilpatrick et al. (2002) in the literature review. In particular, they sought to increase individual and community capacity to influence people's futures, which is critical in rural and regional communities where schools are central institutions and sites for community activity. Through interaction between different community members within a school–VET partnership, social capital is fostered, often in the face of low economic capital or of diminishing economic capital (Johns et al. 2001a; Johns et al. 2001b; Kilpatrick, Bell & Kilpatrick 2000). Every community included in the research was concerned about their community's ongoing viability and saw the school–VET partnership as one way of addressing this matter.

Shimeld (2001) proposed five stages of partnership development—pre-partnership, fledging, first mature, enterprising and second mature (which are outlined in the extended literature review online support document). Only three of the school–VET partnerships had achieved the second mature stage:

Mansfield, Bordertown and Eastern Goldfields. This was demonstrated at an internal level: through embedding the partnership with the community as a regular and expectable activity; high levels of stakeholder satisfaction (including young people); evidence of high levels of social capital (see below); and communities confident of their capacity to continue supporting the partnership. Both Whyalla and Bairnsdale were stepping into the first mature stage, having achieved stable staffing, developed and maintained important relationships, and developed regular planning and review processes. Mt Magnet and Port Pirie were moving toward this first mature stage, although Mt Magnet may fail to arrive, as staff will change next year.

Two things stand out from Shimeld's (2001) descriptions of typical activity in partnership development that were *not* consistently present for the case studies, yet arguably vital for the success and sustainability of a partnership. At an internal level she recommends formal planning, that is, a three-year strategic and one-year business plans. With exception of Eastern Goldfields, the approach to plans was to attach the work to an existing local/regional plan, or after an initial stage of more intense planning activity, to have verbal plans that were generally understood by the participants, or subsume the planing into overall school planning processes.

At an external level she identifies the importance of funding stability to support a partnership and its programs over three to five years. Through its regional structure, Eastern Goldfields was the only location with certain continuity of funding to support the partnership. Other locations had established and/or maintained themselves on fragile funding commitments. All schools utilised state support through regional education staff (where available) and existing education funding formulas to resource staff time for involvement with the partnership. They depended on staff and community goodwill and commitment to go the extra mile where it was required. Both Whyalla and Port Pirie had accessed an employment funding stream with one-year cycles and no guarantees of ongoing funding. Bordertown had only recently been able to gain external funds for teaching resources and infrastructure to establish a centre of excellence for their automotive pathways.

Facilitators of success and commitment in rural and regional areas

Despite uncertainty in funding and varied approaches to planning, these rural and regional school–VET partnerships facilitated success and maintained commitment by drawing on other factors. These included factors that any school–VET partnership needs to be successful: good communication mechanisms with all stakeholders; opportunities for dialogue between the main partnership members; the development of mutual appreciation of partner needs, language and contexts; the building of trust; regular review processes; willingness to adjust program aspects and trial them; the establishment of a community orientation within schools; school staff support for and valuing of VET options; the development of flexible and integrated timetabling arrangements within schools; the creative use of staff resources; witnessing and celebrating success; and honouring people's contributions (Country Education Project & Youth Research Centre 2001; Falk 2000; Figgis 2000; Malley, Frigo & Robinson 1999).

Three other aspects reflected rural and regional contexts (leadership will be addressed separately below). These were: identifying community issues and designing programs that directly respond to them; harnessing community resilience—connecting with community values; and maintaining a shared purpose, despite different needs and designated benefits.

Identifying community issues and designing programs that directly respond to them

The basis of and ongoing commitment to the school–VET partnerships was in addressing specific community needs. All of the sites reported that their school–VET partnerships enabled them to do one or more of the following:

- ✧ increase the retention of young people in their rural or regional area
- ✧ increase school retention overall
- ✧ re-engage young people who had left school with education

- ✧ meet employment needs by providing work-ready young people to fill skill shortages in the local area
- ✧ increase the community's capacity to have an influence on its direction and future.

As noted above, it is vital that rural and regional communities have (and strengthen) capacity to influence their future. It is a means through which social capital is fostered, issues with economic capital can be addressed, and community resilience is demonstrated. For example, prior to their programs, Mansfield and Bordertown had serious problems with urban drift, despite strong community spirit. Kalgoorlie's strong sense of community reflects its isolation, struggle to survive in the early years, and ability to weather the marked rise and fall in commodity prices over recent decades. Like many other areas, it experiences acute shortages of people with skilled trades. It is willing to persevere with VET as a long-term strategy to help overcome this shortage.

Whyalla and Port Pirie have similar situations, with high unemployment and specific skill shortages. In Mt Magnet, the issue was losing young people to other schools and areas at Year 10, or leaving them to likely unemployment, with no direct support to develop work or career pathways. Like Bairnsdale, rather than leaving some young people in the 'too hard basket' and succumbing to negative assumptions about their employability, all of these school–VET partnerships actively engaged employers in a re-valuation of young people's skills and capacity. As employers said: 'give the kids a go'. This acted against social exclusion by helping these young people to gain access to existing social capital.

Harnessing community resilience—connecting with community values

Community resilience refers to the creativity, adaptability, driving values and survival strategies of a community. Each case study site had consistently harnessed and/or developed community values or beliefs that supported the partnership and created a 'can do' attitude to shared issues, rather than feeling overwhelmed and powerless. For example, in looking internally for inspiration and solutions, Bordertown strategically drew on external information and resources to bring their internal solutions to life, rather than depending upon external players to make the difference before they acted locally. They harnessed the strong desire to encourage more young people to live and work in the local area and the community spirit of self-sufficiency. In this process, they tapped into existing community values such as:

- ✧ a shared sense of *responsibility for looking after their young people* and providing them with meaningful opportunities
- ✧ a *spirit of generosity* by providing access to workplaces within which entire pathways programs were run, or supporting work placements for 'no other reason than if I can help'
- ✧ becoming involved because people believed it was 'the *right thing* to do.'

Bordertown also chose their training providers wisely, basing their choice on the provider's ability to demonstrate flexibility, provide on-site training and/or support in a small rural location, and to demonstrate a commitment to good and regular communication. There was a strong sense of pride in what they had achieved at a local level without external intervention.

In the Eastern Goldfields, industry partners reported that the partnership was underpinned by:

... a commitment to the community, a commitment to the young people, a commitment to providing future employees for business, and a belief that what's good for the young people and for business is good for Kalgoorlie. (Employer)

They noted that, despite Kalgoorlie's size as a regional town, there was 'still the element of country' and a commitment to work together.

We need all our resources and that means our young people as much as it does the gold. We need our young people and we want them to stay. We don't want them going off to the city. They're an important part of our community. Yes, it's community that's important.

(Employer)

In Bairnsdale the initiative of the local agencies brought together a group of people to develop a program that would meet the needs of the most educationally disadvantaged young people in the local area. The strong ethos of *social justice* existing in the local community supports and drives this program to 'best benefit the kids that we have'. Further, by refusing to put the issues involved in the 'too hard basket' they adopted a *strengths-based* rather than deficit-based orientation at both the individual student and community level, a characteristic of capacity-building.

Maintaining a shared purpose despite different needs and desired benefits

Although members of the different school–VET partnerships had different reasons and desired benefits from their involvement, they arrived at a *shared overall purpose* all members could support. This was usually based on a set of shared values, as noted above, an over-riding commitment to contributing positively to their communities, and a concern for strengthening the viability of their rural or regional community. A common theme across the case study sites was that this shared purpose involved providing *real* experiences for young people in *real* workplace situations, resulting in *real* outcomes such as jobs, or in some situations, clear educational and vocational pathways. This could be challenging at times when partnership members had different reasons for being involved, different expectations of young people and different approaches to working with them.

For example, the school, industry and TAFE were the three main partners in Whyalla's Pre-Industry Program where, along with economic outcomes, meeting the needs of marginalised young people was a condition of the program funding. All partners wanted to retain young people in the town and minimise the unemployment rate. Specifically, the school wanted to re-engage students, provide better career paths and positive learning experiences, and change employer attitudes about the employability of marginalised young people. Industry wanted to address the skills shortage, build the workforce through a larger pool of apprentices, get young people who had the 'right attitude' to work, and maintain a more stable workforce by hiring local people. For TAFE the partnership helped them to recruit students to respond to industry needs and maintain good numbers within their courses. The school was a strong advocate for social justice and inclusion, although TAFE found it more difficult to focus on this aspect, wanting students who were more able, compliant and easier to teach. This highlighted a problem with cross-sector understanding. This was only resolved through a commitment to a regular review of processes and ensuring that all partnership members were well represented at these meetings, which highlights the importance of communication and dialogue.

Barriers to partnership success in rural and regional areas

Like the success factors, these school–VET partnerships experienced barriers that would be shared by many of their urban counterparts. Included here were: misunderstandings over the obligations and roles of different partners; poor recognition by education departments of the labour-intensive nature of VET; resistance or negative bias about VET among school staff; inflexibility of partners; and slow start-ups by involved agencies or employers that made it difficult to maintain the students' interest and retain them at schools. However, there are several barriers that are more marked in rural and regional communities highlighted by the case studies, including:

- ❖ *School staff resources:* Although staffed by the same formulas as their urban counterparts, rural and regional schools have smaller staff numbers who still need to cover the full range of tasks, such as year level coordinator, student counsellor and VET coordinator. Quite often one person takes on combined tasks, and more active involvement is required of the principal (and deputy or assistant principal if these positions exist), requiring effort that draws on personal goodwill, rather than available or scheduled work time. Managing a VET program can be very time-intensive, due to the complexity of dealing with the wide range of participating agencies,

particularly when an individualised approach is taken to student involvement, which occurs more often in rural areas (for example, Mansfield, Bordertown and Mt Magnet, but also occurred in Bairnsdale). Also see ‘Special needs of rural and remote schools’ in the Implications section.

- ✧ *Transport:* School–VET partnerships rely on teacher and, if available, parent support to transport young people to VET courses, training blocks or structured work placements not based in the local community where public transport was non-existent or not suitable. This requires factoring in additional time and costs, which can be challenging, given that program funding is usually limited and, if external, usually fragile (as noted above).
- ✧ *Local employment options:* There is a limited range of employment opportunities in small communities and in single-industry-dominated regional towns, which restricts student options and may not always cater to their interests. This can be further complicated by difficulties in accessing a suitable VET course or gaining the support of local employers. Therefore, the capacity of a school–VET partnership to analyse and respond to identified community issues, harness community resilience, connect the program with shared community values and develop a shared purpose that includes a range of community representatives becomes imperative for program success.
- ✧ *Costs:* Rural and regional school–VET partnerships may, at times, need to bear additional costs in running their program, both direct and indirect. For example, direct costs include covering transport costs of young people or higher costs when VET providers deliver on site; indirect costs are incurred when course material is adapted to meet the needs of the local context.

Another barrier also shared with urban areas was identified. However, in regional and rural areas it has additional complications. If there is a lack of organisational cross-sectoral understanding between schools and VET providers, rural and regional schools can be at a greater disadvantage, as they may be limited in their VET provider options. There may only be one TAFE institute in the regional area offering courses focused on the needs of regional industry. Alternatively, schools may be working with a registered training organisation on a remote basis of a block-visiting approach. These providers may prove to be inflexible in their timing, unwilling to allow or encourage program adaptation to meet the specific needs of a student body and a community, or poor in reporting information back to the school and involved employers. These issues are explored in more detail in the Implications section under ‘Organisational cross-cultural work in VET’ and ‘Special needs of rural and remote schools’.

Evidence of benefits

The evidence of social and economic benefits from the partnership was based on what the research participants *reported* or could provide. In terms of specific or comparative measures, this was then dependent on whether school–VET partnerships had systems in place to gather specific information, such as destination data, or relevant staff could make time available to analyse their employer participation lists, if there were multiple employers involved. At the time of the research these systems were either not in place, in development at a local level, waiting on a state-driven process or only able to capture information a few months down the track. While valuable, such information is different from the *lived experience* of benefits as witnessed by community members on a daily basis, which was the area that this project focused upon.

Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) believe that social capital requires two sets of resources that interact. ‘Knowledge resources’ include the knowledge of how to gain advice and resources and where to go to obtain this information. ‘Identity resources’ refer to self-confidence, trust, shared values and vision, and commitment to the community. In all school–VET partnerships in this research it was the identity resources that were most frequently reported as evidence of social benefits.

Although all school–VET partnerships connected their work with community values, they simultaneously strengthened and promoted them by creating an opportunity for partnership

members to live them out. Combined with maintaining a focus on a shared purpose, trust was built and the vision of what was possible now and as the partnership developed, could be articulated and supported. ‘Social capital is simultaneously used and built, and the interactions in which this occurs are the only possible occasions when the use and building *can* occur, as social capital cannot just spring from thin air’ (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000, p.101).

For example, the Whyalla school–VET partnership members explained that they had developed *collective ownership* as a result of ‘changing mindsets from everyone’ about the young people in their program. The process of engaging industry/employers facilitated their ownership, as they had a stake in these young people. This extended to community ownership of the program, as there are increasing inquiries from young people or parents/guardians wanting to attend information sessions.

I think here we have ownership. Well I myself have ownership of those students because I want to see them succeed, that’s where my pool of people is coming from. Going out there and seeing them from day one, seeing them develop and seeing what I get at the other end ... It’s nice to know that we belong to the community and we belong to Edward John Eyre, and TAFE and to [the group training company]. They are part of us and we all belong together and we all want to see things succeed because in the end what we get out of it is well worth it to everybody. (Employer)

This collective ownership had an immediate link to economic capital. The partnership could present a united front when advocating for the program and leveraging support, resources or acknowledgment from groups external to the community (which also involved strengthening their knowledge resources). The Economic Development Board’s advice was to:

Put together your network of people first. It makes a pretty powerful lobby group as well when you start talking to governments because you’ve got industry, you’ve got education, you’ve got your facilitation process or person in there as well. Having that critical mass and that one community voice saying this is needed, this is why and we are willing to play together is pretty powerful.

In terms of economic benefits, these are emerging with education and employment outcomes, as well as with the retention of young people in the community who are becoming increasingly self-sufficient and investing in the local economy by buying houses and cars, and choosing to raise their families there. Employment outcomes were almost 90% of 30 young people in the first year of the program and around 80% of over 40 young people in the second year. Those who did not gain employment often returned for further education options, or to have a second run at the program. Many are young people who were previously out of or disengaged from school.

Mansfield provides another example. The Mt Buller Ski Resort has had significant skill shortages over the years and has employed overseas ski instructors to address them. Mansfield Secondary College took advantage of this situation through school-based new apprenticeships, and provided local young people to be trained as instructors. When they finish school these young people can get jobs overseas during their ski seasons, as well as at ski resorts in Australia. Sometimes economic benefits do not remain immediately or constantly in the local area, as young people take their skills and move to other communities, although often other rural or regional areas: ‘School-based new apprenticeships provide education for the whole person, developing confidence and work-ready skills that can be taken by the students to any community they move to in the future’ (Education staff).

As noted above with the Eastern Goldfields, partnership members were clear that social and economic benefits were more likely accrue over the long term, particularly if an inclusive approach was taken. For example, the Bordertown employer supporting the automotive pathways program explained that his reasons for committing to the partnership extended beyond his business to a desire to support his whole industry and actively address the skills shortages through local efforts; that is, choosing to be part of the solution not just the victim of the problem:

Our business has been active because we are passionate about local jobs going to local people and the importance of training ... we have a fairly young workforce and without training you

can't keep up ... We want to keep young people in the district. We want to advocate for other careers outside of uni being just as valuable and skilled and challenging ... The *long-term vision* has made it happen because that is what we wanted ... *We* have made it happen and that is the difference.

(Employer)

However, short-term benefits were evident. Bordertown education staff reported that, by using one or more of their VET options, including just a short stint of workplace learning, they get 99% of students back into schooling when there is a risk they will disengage, and that all students on a VET pathway gain employment directly through their course. These reports of success are supported by the views of employers and community services providers, for example:

The (automotive) program is definitely working because there were 20 students here last year, and all 20 knew where they were going by the end of the year. They either had jobs or were going back to do Year 12, which I thought was pretty amazing—a lot of them within their own town. They knew what they wanted to do, like 'I want to go back and do Year 12 and then come and work for you.'

(Employer)

Along with Whyalla, Bairnsdale and Mt Magnet highlight the benefits for young people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. For some of the most marginalised young people in the community, the opportunity to undertake a work placement offers the chance to build employment networks they have never previously had—they 'break in' to the existing social capital from which they may have been shut out, by increasing their 'knowledge resources'. In Bairnsdale a young Indigenous man was offered an apprenticeship in welding as a result of the course and his work placement. There were very few if any other Indigenous young people undertaking apprenticeships in the region.

In terms of 'identity resources', the young people are also shut out of existing social capital based on assumptions of whom they are as people—the story about them. Being in work placements in local businesses means young people are seen in a more positive light by local community members, and their skills, abilities and personal qualities are recognised. At Mt Magnet this change in attitude was particularly important, as the majority of the VET students were Indigenous and directly felt the effects of racial discrimination in their daily lives, including experiencing great difficulty gaining employment. New opportunities are now emerging from employers, including the local mine, which is the most significant source of employment in this small, isolated rural town. Many employers were initially reluctant to accept students.

Employers often identified aspects of economic capital in terms of business advantages, such as a more streamlined recruitment process where they were confident they would retain the worker and could make plans around training, workload capacity and expansion. With students in VET pathways, employers saved money overall in the training and apprenticeship process. When the student became an employee, they had recognisable core skills and knowledge that made them immediately productive, which was particularly valuable when the employer was affected by skills shortages. For example:

We could give him the skills so he could become beneficial to our business, have input and make money for us. If they have learned those skills already then they will fit in a lot easier and it makes the transition easier for the employers as they have skills and knowledge about what they are doing (by doing VET at school first).

(Employer)

However, there was also an awareness by employers of how they contribute to the social fabric and overall viability of their community if they look outside their own walls:

The main thing is it's a community thing—we see the need to keep kids here. The school recognises that and trying to facilitate that. Lose your youth and things suffer ... Businesses are not just out there to make as much money as they can, you have to take a little time and put it back. We are all the same people, not just 'us and them'. This is a way of doing it. You can sponsor what you like, but if you take a kid on and that family talks to another family then they think their kids can do that later in life.

(Employer)

Table 2 draws together indicators of human, social, physical and financial capital drawn from the case study sites. These indicators identify the contribution that the partnerships at the different sites have made in regard to community capacity-building and the development of social and economic capital.

Table 2: Indicators of change for types of ‘capital’ in the case study sites

Type of ‘capital’ and indicator	Case study site					
	SA rural	SA regional	Vic. rural	Vic. regional	WA rural	WA regional
<i>Human capital (individual capabilities of community members)</i>						
Increased youth retention in the region	X	X	X	X	X	X
Increased school retention in Years 11 & 12		X	X	X	X	X
Increased employer engagement in co-operative training provision	X	X	X	X	X	X
Increased self-esteem in youth	X	X	X	X	X	X
Increased attachment by youth to region/ community	X	X	X	X	X	X
Increased school attendance rates	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Social capital (networks, relationships, trust and reciprocity, as well as mutually beneficial partnerships)</i>						
New community organisation formed (compact, coordinator, informal network etc.) including appointment of a dedicated coordinator/broker	X		X	X	X	X
Local connection of schools with VET improved through shared common purpose meetings		X				X
Connection of local economic planning agencies with schools and VET		X				X
Improved connection of community to school	X	X	X		X	X
Development of employment networks for young people	X	X	X	X		X
School playing central employment role in community	X		X			
<i>Physical capital (infrastructure)</i>						
Buildings and equipment (for example)	X			X	X	
<i>Financial capital (provision of goods and services)</i>						
Local industry contributing funds to partnerships	X	X		X	X	X
Reduced skill shortages in local industry	X	X	X			X
Partnership acquires additional agency or government funds for vocational training programs	X	X		X	X	X
Customisation of curriculum and learning to needs	X	X	X	X	X	X
Increased apprenticeships available to youth		X	X	X		X
Increased skill levels of young people	X	X	X	X	X	X

The role of leadership

In the literature the ‘enabling leadership’ approach was identified as an effective way of ensuring that leadership is embedded and system-wide, rather than individually situated. It accounts for the different leadership roles required across a program; that is, from the trigger and initiate stages, through the development, maintenance and sustainability stages (Johns 2003). This is crucial in rural and regional areas for at least three different reasons. First, some areas experience regular staff/workforce turnover, so investing all leadership roles in one person means that knowledge and

expertise leaves with that person and needs to be rebuilt, even if the replacement is enthusiastic and committed. Second, other areas may have a more stable workforce but leadership roles for a range of community concerns can fall to the same people and they may become over-burdened and unable to operate effectively without a collective approach. Third, the existing social relationships within rural and regional communities are the basis on which connections are made for involvement in and support of partnerships, so having more than one person in a leadership role can expand the potential number of partner members.

In most of the school–VET partnerships in this research there was an effort to *distribute* the leadership, with people taking on different roles through the life of the partnership. This, in itself, facilitated social capital. It was based on schools realising that they could not provide everything for students, and recognising the benefits and potential of involving other community groups, including VET providers, industry and local business. In this way they looked at ‘what is best for the student’, such as the social justice position adopted at Bairnsdale and the social inclusion agenda for Whyalla. Working with other players also required recognising their unique skills and experiences and developing respectful processes based on joint planning and decision-making, which created opportunities for shared leadership. This was not without its struggles, but operated best when partnership members were willing to share credit for program success, while still honouring the contributions of specific partnership members.

At times the school–VET partnerships began with strong community involvement in the leadership group but this dropped off over time. If this happens in the first two years of a program, such as in Bairnsdale’s situation, there is the risk of program failure following initial success, and requires action to re-engage partners and supports so that leadership becomes community-embedded. The distributed leadership model of the Eastern Goldfields on the other hand helps them to manage changes in the coordinator position, which has occurred a few times over the nine years of their regional compact.

Like Bairnsdale, Bordertown commenced with strong community involvement through a community management group and achieved success and commitment over the long term. It also ensured that there was ‘critical mass’ within the school, with a team of three people supporting the VET programs, including the principal, not just leaving it all to the VET coordinator. They explained that ‘the big thing in this community are the links made with the school and local business people, it’s a long-term thing. Our parents know the staff, the business and community leaders do, and they trust the school and we trust the businesses and that is how its built’ (Education staff). However, they have recently found that they need to be wary of complacency and taking the ongoing contributions of community members for granted. This required sustaining more regular communication between school staff and other community members who are showing leadership and trying to create new opportunities for the school–VET partnership. They are now considering reconvening their community management group.

Student experiences

The vast majority of students interviewed in these rural and regional school–VET partnerships reported positive experiences in their chosen programs.

At a school and educational level, students reported that their program was worthwhile, made school more relevant and positive, and gave them a reason to continue with education. They often developed different relationships with teachers, which they described as more ‘adult’ where they felt ‘respected’. For many young people their participation strongly influenced their decision to continue their education and provided clear direction on employment and career options.

I didn’t think much about school. I used to go and come home and that was about it. Now I’m really organised. I’ve started to encourage my little sister to do VET. I love to tell everyone about it. I’m really committed. I used to have days off but now I’m one of the top

students. I'm more responsible. I get up in time to go to work by myself because you have to do that when you work. It's real work experience. (Student)

Students could identify that what they had learnt would have direct application to their life after school: 'it feels different [compared with school] because you know you're going to get something out of it' (Student). They started developing the 'employability skills' that businesses find so attractive, such as a positive attitude, punctuality, enthusiasm, awareness of safety etc: 'Technical skills we can teach as they go but if they have a good work attitude they are going to turn out to be a pretty good tradesperson or worker' (Employer). Students reported feeling better about themselves and their abilities, and more confident in applying for jobs.

When I go to work I don't think about school but I wouldn't have had the confidence to go and get a job myself, so doing a School-based New Apprenticeship in Office Administration helped me make the move to a job that I enjoy. I have been offered a full-time job there when I leave school that I will take up. (Student)

Students were enthusiastic about learning about the world of work, particularly when they did not find school attractive, or they got a 'chance to shine' when this did not occur for them at school. For some young people, the availability of the VET programs in their area was the *only* way that they could imagine re-engaging with school and gaining the skills they needed to find employment. Others learned enough to realise they were not ready for that step and that continuing with education was a better option.

Beyond skills, many young people needed to develop work-related networks, which were made possible through structured workplace learning and school-based new apprenticeships. If, previously, they had a negative reputation or engaged in offending behaviour, or were from the 'wrong side of town', then their access into such networks was limited. Work placements set up by their VET programs gave them a chance to be perceived differently, so the story of who they were could change, particularly if matched with the value of 'giving the kids a go'.

Employers would say to me, 'I've got a really great student'. Sometimes members of the community would say 'that student is a real shocker', but the employer said, 'No, he's fantastic, they're just wonderful kids'. (Education staff)

Young people also reported that doing a VET program gave them an opportunity to feel part of the community, as community members 'see me as giving something back to the community and [people] come up and tell me I am doing a good job' (Student). They felt they gained respect from adult community members. They expanded their social, not just their work connections.

Significantly, a good proportion of students reported that the VET program enabled them to stay in their communities, particularly when it gave them access to real work opportunities. Although they always had critical things to say about their communities, many wanted to remain there, or at least return if they did choose to spend time away. However, the opportunity of a real employment option could override this, and if the program led them elsewhere, they still perceived that as a good outcome. Quite often this was another rural or regional area so, although retention in the local community may not be achieved, urban drift is still minimised. Some young people expressed appreciation that the VET options existed, as it made them more hopeful about their own and the town's future: 'I think [the program] helps a lot of people in the town. There are opportunities out there and they are providing it for us' (Student).

A role for student participation in the design and monitoring of programs was relatively absent in these school-VET partnerships. For example, Bairnsdale was the only location with a student committee established to discuss and review the program progress and contribute to decision-making. Students in Whyalla reported they could access information on the program and influence decisions through a good relationship with the school program coordinator.

In many other human services, including schools, youth participation has proved to be an important factor in: strengthening programs; better meeting the needs of young people; and

improving the experience of involved staff (for example, Australian Centre for Equity through Education & the Australian Youth Research Centre 2001; Holdsworth et al. 2005). Contrary to what human services or education staff may think, youth participation usually reduces power struggles, although it does challenge staff to learn how to recognise and respect young people's rights to contribute to program design and decision-making. In several of the workplaces included in this research, having workers contribute ideas to the overall operations and organisational culture of the business was seen as important. Youth participation processes prepare young people to do this, and some young people were interested to experience this.

Transferability: Implementing the learning in new contexts

This research held the assumption that understanding how successful models and partnerships operate would be of most value to communities that wish to review, strengthen or create a school–VET partnership. In line with naturalistic inquiry, this is a process of transferability rather than generalisability. Port Pirie provided an insight into this transferability process.

Local community analysis

Regional education staff conducted a consultation process with Port Pirie's local industry in early 2004 in relation to their desire to encourage John Pirie High School to become more proactive in integrating VET within the curriculum and in developing community links. Around the same time the Regional Development Board ran a community analysis; developed a strategic plan focused on training, skills and employment; and gained state funding to implement projects that met identified objectives. All outcomes were shared and the school developed the 'Pathways to Engineering' VET program that met an objective in the local training and employment strategic plan, and required the school to create a partnership with TAFE and industry players. It responded to the following community issues:

- ✧ high youth unemployment rates, often generational unemployment
- ✧ a depressed local economy and limited workforce opportunities (due to financial struggles for the main industry player over the last decade only just being resolved)
- ✧ shortages in skilled trades in local engineering and fabrication industries
- ✧ a community in which networks and family name count
- ✧ loss of young people to the city, that is, urban drift
- ✧ employers with negative perceptions of students from John Pirie High School, based on some of the reasons above and with more students from a low socioeconomic situation.
- ✧ gaps between employer expectations and the employability skills of young people, leading employers to recruit beyond rather than in Port Pirie for apprentices and tradespeople.

Active research and comparative analysis of program and community issues

The regional education staff were familiar with the Whyalla Pre-Industry Program, as this was within their region. Representatives of the Port Pirie group visited Whyalla to talk with their partnership members and observe aspects of the program. Although the two towns shared similar concerns, the Port Pirie partnership decided to adapt the Whyalla model to fit the local community context, their student population and their specific concerns. Port Pirie was focusing on 'existing students in Years 11 and 12, most of whom would probably have continued with mainstream schooling even if they were not really enjoying it' rather than 'students who are returning to school or young people who have left and are trying to get into the workforce'. They asked students to submit an application and have an interview, similar to applying for a job, with 'The message [that] "this is a one off. You have to work at it, and it is not a free ride. You have to perform as a position in the pre-vocational course is not guaranteed"' (Education staff). In this way Port Pirie hoped to

achieve good success in the first year that would build community and employer credibility—two of the major community issues they faced.

Facilitators and barriers for success in proactive program planning

The Port Pirie partnership identified several features of the Whyalla program that supported success: first, choosing school program staff who were supportive of VET and new initiatives and who could manage a changed curriculum and role, work successfully with the student cohort (all young men) and demonstrate enthusiasm to the program. Second, they needed to adapt existing school curriculum to reflect the content, format and style of the engineering industry, such as occupational health and safety, reading technical specifications, and spelling words used in the workplace. Third, they noted the importance of building positive, direct and strong links with industry, a particularly relevant factor as industry links in Port Pirie were weak and there were negative assumptions about the John Pirie High students that exacerbated community issues of unemployment and status. They paid attention to organising work experience placements across *all* year levels and targeting some employers for the Pathways to Engineering program to avoid burning out employer goodwill. They built the New Apprenticeship Centre worker who had strong links with and understanding of industry needs into the partnership.

The Port Pirie partnership also identified the main barrier for Whyalla—difficulties in communication and negotiation between the school and TAFE sectors in relation to different approaches to administration, curriculum, pedagogy and pastoral care. Direct communication between relevant John Pirie High School and TAFE staff was instituted, along with students spending a day per fortnight at TAFE during the first semester. The partnership also recognised the need to provide ongoing support to students once they moved into TAFE full-time in the second half of the year. Like Whyalla, they have prevented problems in the TAFE–industry interface by negotiating the pre-vocational course content directly with industry.

Developing review processes

The value of regular review processes built into the Whyalla program was also noted; this gave them the capacity to modify program elements in each year and from one year to the next in order to refine the program. The Port Pirie partnership planned to hold periodic reviews over the first year to monitor progress, and institute and trial changes as needed.

Implications for policy and practice

This research has raised several implications for policy and practice. Three of the main areas for consideration are outlined below. Communities or schools which align themselves to one or more of the specific case studies are encouraged to consult the individual case study reports available in the online support documents for further information relevant to their situation.

Choosing models to respond to community needs

Although three distinct models were identified, two for regional and one for rural communities, the two regional models are not mutually exclusive. A regional community could opt for a regional cluster model to cater for a broad range young people's needs, and then within this, also develop a specialised program model to address the unique needs of a specific group of young people who are not sufficiently accommodated within the cluster model. The whole-of-community model characteristic of rural communities, on the other hand, already builds in a 'both/and' capacity to respond to the range of unique needs within their cohort of young people.

However, if rural communities incorporate a regional focus, they can develop pathways or specialised programs similar to regional communities. For example, Bordertown has been strategic in drawing in students from other regional schools to make their automotive pathways program viable. The students come in to complete the block placements with the registered training organisation which visits Bordertown and operates from a business premises providing training space, workshop access and supervision/support from qualified staff. Structured workplace learning is undertaken in their own communities.

Whole-of-community and regional cluster models immediately lend themselves to embedding policy, practice, relationships and leadership into the community and across a range of people; that is, systemically, rather than being dependent upon having or recruiting the 'right staff', which Whyalla, Port Pirie and Bairnsdale found was crucial in their specialised programs. This also needs to be factored into decisions about model choice in order to achieve community 'fit.'

Rather than feeling pushed around by VET as a specific system, the school-VET partnerships in this research strategically selected the VET options that responded to their community needs and even individual needs. They started from a community consciousness, not a VET program base, and chose to engage in VET *because* it responded to specific issues in a way that mainstream education options could not easily manage. Nachtigal (1982) maintains that while central authorities have a role in defining rural education problems:

The locus of control for making those decisions must be returned to the community, with outside agencies playing a facilitating role, not a dictating one. We are also saying that the criteria for deciding if a problem is in fact a problem be more firmly rooted in local conditions and not in a preconceived set of standards uniformly applied to all school systems regardless of size and location. (Nachtigal 1982, p.303)

There was no specific pattern to the choice of school-VET partnership. For example, assumptions that structured workplace learning provides a lighter level of commitment and connection between schools and employers compared with school-based new apprenticeships or that school-based new

apprenticeships make stronger contributions to social and economic capital did not apply. For example, in Whyalla, there was a high level of commitment and connection between employers for structured workplace learning with high expectations of employment outcomes. Bordertown used school-based new apprenticeships in a manner that kept employer commitments light, as there was no expectation that this would lead to ongoing employment, although it could. On the other hand, there were stronger hopes of employment in Mansfield and Mt Magnet. However, Mansfield chose school-based new apprenticeships as they were more adaptable and cost-effective in catering for individual students in a small rural and isolated school, whereas VET requires a class of students in one subject and is limited by the expertise of teachers in the school. The key message was about *being strategic* in responding to local contexts and utilising VET options that fit, rather than imposing a preferred option in a 'one size fits all' approach.

Organisational cross-cultural work in VET

Previous research has shown that rural schools face considerable barriers and challenges in the provision of vocational education and training (for example, Country Education Project & Youth Research Centre 2001). This was borne out again through the experiences reported by case study participants in this research project. Delivery of VET requires that schools and registered training organisations, including TAFE, work together, despite contrasting cultures that can emerge in relation to factors such as flexibility in delivery, different teaching styles, and accountability. They provide barriers and challenges that must be negotiated in order to sustain partnerships.

Lack of flexibility in delivery

The research illustrated how registered training organisations need to show flexibility in responding to the differing learning needs of students, as 'one form of provision of VET, or one approach, or one set of courses, or one teaching method, does not work across the board' (Falk 2000, p.9). Flexibility is required of training providers so schools can access appropriate courses or adapt them to meet the need of students and communities. Despite the fact that adaptation is pedagogically sound, training providers may be unwilling to allow or encourage it.

At one site a certificate that provided generic rather than industry-specific skills was seen to best suit the needs of local industries and businesses and, as a result, had the capacity to provide young people with wider employment opportunities. Rural skills is one such course available from providers in other parts of the state but not at the TAFE with whom the school was currently associated. The local TAFE gave little encouragement to provide access to it or similar courses. This was an unintended but real outcome stemming from a lack of understanding or appreciation of the special circumstances and constraints facing this small isolated secondary school (also see 'Special needs of rural and remote schools' below).

Two sites that worked with formally disengaged young people found that the teaching methods at TAFE were not always geared to the needs of the young people, with too much expectation that they could work independently and had the level of prior knowledge required to complete work requirements. Teaching staff struggled to appreciate the issues these young people faced in attending education and training after a considerable break, or they believed the young people were not suitable for the course due to these issues; that is, distancing TAFE from the problem and individualising it. Consequently, students dropped out of courses, did not attend consistently or comply with TAFE requirements, or needed strong school/program-based support to maintain their involvement. Schools are very familiar with providing high levels of pastoral care and support to address personal and social difficulties, based on their duty of care requirements, whereas TAFE operates by an adult learning model that expects greater individual responsibility of students.

In one site, the solution was to look for other partnerships for training, rather than renegotiate one with TAFE, by utilising adult and community education (ACE) and other providers. In the other site, the school and TAFE, along with their other partners, have persisted in addressing issues by

trailing different strategies and increasing their level of interaction at the program level, and dialogue at the partnership level, despite this being uncomfortable and challenging at times. A shared commitment to good personal, education and employment outcomes for young people, which also help address industry needs, keeps them in the partnership and willing to be flexible.

Accountability

The accountability of registered training organisations was noted as a challenge in the delivery of training for school-based new apprenticeships. Even when there had been a long partnership with registered training organisations, there were still difficulties with communication and reporting arrangements between TAFE and schools. One site found that the lack of reporting by the registered training organisations has made it difficult for the school to determine whether all the competency training has been delivered at the appropriate times. The employers and the students are often not aware when the training should be delivered. Thus, on occasions, the student will get behind with training if the registered training organisation does not visit the workplace when required.

Some private registered training organisations have taken more responsibility in regard to the provision of training compared with TAFE. Private registered training organisations are funded differently from TAFE; that is, for the units introduced to the students. TAFE, on the other hand, is funded when the student enrolls. This creates a different motivation for meeting student training and support requirements.

Special needs of rural and remote schools

The delivery of VET to small rural schools, such as Mt Magnet, Mansfield or Bordertown, raises a number of significant problems.

- ✧ The number of students in the post-compulsory years is likely to be fewer than is considered financially viable by TAFE colleges or other delivery agencies. If the number of students at any one site ultimately determines delivery, under the traditional delivery modes the majority of small rural secondary schools will be excluded from participation in VET programs.
- ✧ Many smaller schools are geographically isolated from the delivery source. For example, Mt Magnet is more than 300 km from the regional centre where the nearest TAFE is located. Accordingly, on-site visits by TAFE staff are relatively expensive and time-consuming. Bordertown is two hours drive from the regional TAFE; only one program area from that TAFE is willing to travel to provide locally based support to students and employers and deliver training at the school.
- ✧ While the range of VET courses across any state is comprehensive, those which can be provided by the local institution, while still impressive, may not meet the needs of students.
- ✧ The retention of staff in smaller, more remote centres is a major issue for employers and governments. Staff turnover can be high, and both program and funding continuity is a major concern. It is more so when faced with the introduction of a new program as complex as VET, with limited access to expert support.

Therefore, if rural and remote students in small communities are to achieve fair, reasonable and equitable access to training, many of the established procedures and formats relating to VET need to be reconsidered or refined. The notion of multiple-site delivery, for example, could be explored to achieve viability of numbers. Alternative delivery formats are required. Electronic delivery provides one means by which students can access the broadest range of courses. Community participation and developing a sense of local ownership and management may go some way to countering the negative impact of staff turnover.

One example of an alternative delivery format involves having students complete school-based new apprenticeships in the workplace, rather than through the delivery of VET at the school. Mansfield

Secondary College has used this mode of delivery to allow a wide range of certificates to be available for students, as this form of VET is not dependent on numbers of students at one site. The availability of certificates is only limited by work placement opportunities in a community and the flexibility of the school timetable to allow students time to complete them, rather than the availability of trained school staff to deliver VET and numbers of students to create a VET class. Students attend a workplace for two days a week and receive their training every two to three months from the registered training organisation which delivers competency-based training in the workplace. Although Mansfield is a small rural town and more than an hour's drive from the nearest registered training organisation, many different registered training organisations deliver the training for the different certificates to Mansfield students.

Clearly, the demands and responses to these and other issues confronting small rural and remote schools and their communities in providing a VET pathway for their young people will differ from site to site. From the perspective of transferability, there is value in sharing the diversity of lessons learned from different locations. As demonstrated through Port Pirie's experiences, drawing on and adapting successful models and strategies to another community's unique circumstances can prevent schools from reinventing wheels, and save time and effort in the processes of trial and error.

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Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in two support documents which can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1686.html>>. Details of these documents are listed below.

Schools, vocational education and training and partnerships: Capacity-building in rural and regional communities—Literature review

- ✧ Introduction
- ✧ Capacity building and 'capital'
- ✧ School–VET partnerships in rural and regional communities
- ✧ National and state policies for VET and rural education
- ✧ Summary
- ✧ References

Schools, vocational education and training and partnerships: Capacity-building in rural and regional communities—Case study descriptions

- ✧ Introduction to the case studies
- ✧ Bordertown High School: Bordertown, South Australia
- ✧ Edward John Eyre High School: Whyalla, South Australia
- ✧ John Pirie High School: Pt Pirie, South Australia
- ✧ Mansfield Secondary College: Mansfield, Victoria
- ✧ Bairnsdale Secondary College: Bairnsdale, Victoria
- ✧ Mt Magnet District High School: Mt Magnet, Western Australia
- ✧ Eastern Goldfields Senior High School: Kalgoorlie, Western Australia
- ✧ References
- ✧ Appendix: Interview guides



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

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

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

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