

---

## NSW DET CONFERENCE

### Workplace Learning and the Role of VET

### Sydney, Thursday 3 May 2007

If the VET system and industry are to work together more closely, a key area of collaboration is workplace-based learning. What does this development mean for the VET system's focus on formal, national qualifications? Should VET practitioners do more to support informal workplace learning? How can employers be encouraged to improve the conditions for learning in their workplaces? What happens when the development and career aspirations of workers and employers differ?

This conference is taking place at a time when the vocational education and training sector is being urged to work more closely with industry. In several parts of Australia, initiatives to better align business and skill development objectives are underway, and state and federal governments have recently agreed to set aside a proportion of total vocational funds for 'innovative partnerships with industry'. Challenges in implementation include the capacity of VET providers to keep pace with the skill demands of rapidly changing industries, and to provide the quality of learning opportunities that experienced workers want<sup>1</sup>.

During debates on the ideal relationship between industry and the formal VET system, industry has at times been criticised for an insufficient training effort, for example in the context of reliance of some industries on temporary overseas migrants, and in relation to the 1990s decline in apprenticeship commencements. Industry responds that the bulk of employer training effort is devoted to *informal* workplace learning, not qualifications, and that this is what's important in terms of 'getting the job done'<sup>2</sup>. Data tend to support this. Qualifications, for example, are mentioned in only 16 per cent of advertisements for VET-related occupations<sup>3</sup>, and the ABS reports that, while 41 per cent of employers provide structured training for their employees, 79 per cent provide unstructured training<sup>4</sup>.

This conference will bring together academics, managers and VET practitioners to address these issues and challenges. The NSW Department of Education and Training has invited **Dr Helen Rainbird, Professor of Human Resource Management at the Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham**, to Australia as the keynote speaker. Professor Rainbird is a world-renowned expert on workplace learning, and has also written widely on the interface between workplace relations and training, employee participation and low paid work. Other speakers include Richard Cooney, Peter Waterhouse, Giselle Mawer, Andrew Smith, Kim Windsor, Caroline Alcorso and a range of VET practitioners.

---

<sup>1</sup> Figgis, J. and Standen, A. (2005) *Training skilled workers. Lessons from the oil and gas industry*, NCVET, Adelaide.

<sup>2</sup> Townsend, R. Waterhouse, P. and Malloch, M. (2005) *Getting the job done, how employers use and value accredited training leading to qualification*, NCVET, Adelaide.

<sup>3</sup> Cully, M (2005) *What's it worth: establishing the value*, NCVET, Adelaide, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> ABS (2003) *Employer training expenditure and practices, Australia*, Cat no: 6362.0.