Premier’s TAFE NSW Scholarship

Partners in Vocational Education and Training in the EU

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My study tour of leading European Union (EU) vocational education and training (VET) providers and partners enabled me to examine how complimentary partnerships with businesses could contribute to best practice and enhance the strengths of TAFE NSW.

I chose destinations to examine best practice examples in partnerships in different contexts of VET.

* + a tour of Finland to observe the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) number one ranked country for education
  + a tour of Austrian VET providers and their business partners. Austria is identified in OECD rankings and prior study tours as a world leader in workplace training
  + a visit to TASTAFE to share the results of my tour and to discuss how lessons learnt can be applied to vocational education needs in both NSW and Tasmania (TASTAFE, 2015)

My tour addressed these key issues:

* + how to form relationships with complimentary organisations to expand training options for students
  + how to balance the needs of stakeholders to ensure sustainable relationships
  + how review and consultative practices contribute to effective quality assurance and continuing improvement
  + how to use collaborative tools and techniques to manage communication where stakeholders are spread across geography, language and time zones

Study tour methodology

Planning my study tour involved research, requests for support, referrals for visits and preparing interview questions. During that process I found it interesting that, in a world of systems and social media tools, personal communication supported through personal referral from friends was the most successful method.

My draft interview questions were themed to align to my study tour rationale with the assumptions I had made. I customised the questions based on the type of organisation and country before emailing them prior to my interviews. [Further details on my blog](http://partnersinveteu.blogspot.com/2016/05/interview-questions.html).

I followed simple steps with all of my interviews:

* + I sent copies of the interview themes and draft questions to my subjects ahead of time. I also reassured them that the interview would be informal and that their responses would be confidential.
  + I made the interviews in as informal and conversational as possible. I told them about who myself and why I was visiting world leaders in education. I usually asked them about themselves and their roles, and use some of the points they raised to introduce my questions. I would also ask them to introduce me to anyone else they thought would be helpful to my study tour.
  + I tried to capture my notes from the interviews into my blog as soon as possible. That resulted in fast feedback and an opportunity to fine-tune my subsequent interviews.
  + I emailed to thank my subjects for their time and ask if they had any further points to add. I also asked them if they would like to know more about Australian VET and invited them to browse through some of the teaching resources from our Moodle Learning Management System (LMS).

Finland

Finland ranks first in OECD education rankings with a system that is widely known as student centred and grounded in communities. My visits with staff from Helsinki Business College, Luovi and the Finnish National Board of Education allowed me to observe characteristics of their education system that I believe contribute to their high world ranking:

* + Culturally the Finns are very focused on social/civic partnerships, which they see as collaborating with essential parts of their community to support their students’ learning. Stakeholders included industry groups, businesses, business chambers, trade unions, community groups, schools, universities and VET educators.
  + Common words and phrases kept appearing in my interviews: ‘we’, ‘citizenship’, ‘respect’, ‘consultation’, ‘trust’, ‘entrepreneurial thinking’, ‘holistic’, ‘partner’, ‘wellbeing’ and ‘student’.Culturally the Finns appear to be very community minded and focused on holistic practices.
  + Everywhere I went I saw children from five years and older on public transport on excursions with their teachers, even on wet and snowy days. This culture of learning through life experiences appears to prepare students to be independent and versatile, which can be observed from a very early age.
  + Teachers are highly respected professionals. ‘We trust and respect our teachers.’
  + Libraries are well used and socially valued. Both the Vallinin community library and the Helsinki University library had far more people than I would typically observe in Australia. Helsinki Business College students undertake projects in the community library providing a help desk for the community, and the elderly in particular, on how to use their mobile phones and basic PC troubleshooting.
  + Work placement is a mandatory part of VET courses but ranges from block release through to students being embedded within the business for their entire course. The delivery pattern is based on business and student needs rather than being driven by course or college processes.
  + In many cases the colleges are owned by either the business chamber or the local government entity. Federal government provides the finances, but the colleges are owned and operated by their own communities.
  + Assessment takes place in the workplace and final grades are based on a three-way consultation between employers, students and teachers. Consultation meetings typically take one to two hours with a detailed discussion of the student’s performance in the job and time to reach a consensus on how the average of their rankings will be recorded as a mark.
  + Courses are typically comprised of five to eight subjects compared to the 17+ units of competence that are common in Australian VET qualifications. That appears to minimise the administrative overhead in managing assessment.
  + The Finns were very interested in Australian education, and they were particularly impressed with two programs from Riverina Institute: [Talking Tech](https://www.facebook.com/talkingtechriverina/)[[1]](#footnote-1) and the [IT Pathway](http://www.itpathway.com.au/)[[2]](#footnote-2) program with Charles Sturt University. They were interested but also somewhat puzzled by the processes surrounding assessment development and validation. The Finnish education is not as administratively focused as in Australia. After some debate on one visit a teacher said to me. ‘There is more to life than skills, knowledge, rules and processes.’
  + They have a strong commitment to exchange programs. Every person I met with had heard of the Erasmus+ exchange program and knew of at least one person who had been involved.
  + Quality control is continuous and reflective rather than audit based. There is no sense of blame or stress: ‘If it is not right we will do better next time.’
  + Most students spend an average of five years in VET and/or university – ‘Students need time to learn.’ Most students aren't expected to be employed fulltime till about 25 years of age.
  + I didn’t see any distance education. Colleges are formed to meet local needs as opposed to national or state needs. However, some colleges in remote areas were operated in partnership with Helsinki-based colleges.

In Finland relationships are formed with complimentary organisations through a cultural tradition of community partnerships. The needs of stakeholders are balanced through regular assessment meetings to ensure sustainable relationships that directly relate to student outcomes. Quality assurance and continual improvement are managed through a blame free process of review based on open meetings with stakeholders led by the Finnish National Board of Education. Based on my interviews I suspect that the Erasmus+ exchange program is the most successful tool to foster collaboration across time zones and national borders.

Finland has a culture and mix of practices that is working exceptionally well for them. In my opinion their community partnerships and workplace assessment practices could be adapted into an Australian context. Their culture of community consultation and engagement in education is not focused solely on skills and knowledge; they see the students holistically as being prepared to be productive work-ready citizens. Their consultative assessment process fosters a relationship between colleges, teachers and business leaders in addition to producing marks for subjects. Those relationships are an opportunity to ensure that colleges are providing the courses and employability skills that are essential to a healthy economy.

Taking part in further exchange programs would assist Australia to continue to exchange best practices from each country.

Austria

Austria is known for having one of the highest rates of workplace training in the world. It has a strong economy based on high tech manufacturing. The VET system is grounded in industry with mandatory business chamber membership enabling strong industry leadership in colleges.

To gain a wide range of views I conducted interviews with a university of applied science, two VET colleges, the Vorarlberg Business Chamber and the Ministry of Education.

*Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKO) in Vorarlberg*

(Read more on my [blog](http://partnersinveteu.blogspot.com/2016/05/meeting-with-mario-kempf-from-austrian.html))

WKO represents the interests of more than 450,000 Austrian companies. Membership is mandatory for all Austrian businesses. The WKO has very strong relationships and communication with its business members and runs regular events locally or with partners for local businesses and educators.

WKO’s funding to colleges is matched dollar for dollar by the government.

*TGM Die Schule der Technic*

(Read more on my [blog](http://partnersinveteu.blogspot.com/2016/04/tgm-die-schule-der-technic.html))

TGM offers courses in engineering, IT and biomedical and health sciences.

Curses are typically five years, with the first three years spent on core subjects and specialist subjects completed in years four and five. A student’s final year is based on a major project that is undertaken in industry. The final project is based on fairly general criteria that allows the teacher to make an assessment.

*Institut für IT Sicherheitsforschung, Department Informatik und Security*

(Read more on my [blog](http://partnersinveteu.blogspot.com/2016/05/fachhochschule-st-polten.html))

The [St. Pölten UAS LLC](https://www.fhstp.ac.at/en/about-us) is locally anchored, globally connected and offers qualitative academic education in rail technology and mobility, health sciences, computer science and security, media and digital technologies, media and economics and social sciences. The linking of issues in teaching and researching creates room for interdisciplinary scientific findings, products and solutions for the economy and society. About 2600 students receive a practice-oriented academic education in 17 study programs and numerous continuing education courses.

*Vorarlberg University of Applied Sciences (FH Vorarlberg)*

(Read more on my [blog](http://partnersinveteu.blogspot.com.au/2016/05/fh-vorarlberg-university-of-applied.html))

FH Vorarlberg offers bachelor and masters level programs in business administration, engineering and technology, design and social work.

As one of the most research-intensive universities of applied sciences in Austria, the majority of research and development projects are undertaken in collaboration with regional and international businesses and organisations. At FH Vorarlberg, scientists and students work in the fields of process and product engineering, microtechnology, user-centred technologies, social and economic sciences and energy.

*Austria Summary*

Austria has an amazingly successful manufacturing sector that has been built on workplace training and a collaborative approach between industry and educational providers. Australia could learn from their consultative processes with business chambers as well as their model for work placements and assessments.

*Discussion points*

* + Austria and in particular Vorarlberg State has a strong history of educational and industrial development and is known for high tech manufacturing.
  + CEOs often come from a trade background and have risen up through the ranks to lead their companies. CEOs have a lot of influence in politics and the educational system.
  + Sustainability is important to Austrians, with 100 percent sustainable, mainly hydroelectric, power.
  + STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) is as big an issue here as it is in Australia. They are very concerned about attracting enough technical employees.
  + They have low enrolments of women in tech fields, approximately 5 to 10 per cent. They have trialled lots of different plans to attract and support women into technical jobs.
  + Feedback is managed through standardised surveys that conducted at every level of the process. These ensure that all participants are aware of the views of other stakeholders. Feedback is recorded in a highly standardised way so it can be analysed in detail.
  + Work placements
  + Recruitment for workplace students occurs on a common date for all companies.
  + Approximately 80 to 90 per cent stay with a company after the work placement.
  + Companies complete a survey after each work placement. Although they are basically happy with the VET system, the satisfaction data is slowly dropping every year. Technology based subjects are complex and it is hard for schools to maintain their standards. ‘The curriculum is getting fuller with less time for technical subjects.’
  + WFO keeps pushing that maths and tech subjects are important and needed to maintain standards.
  + In the large colleges that I visited there appeared to be enough local work placement opportunities to meet demand. It would be interesting to investigate what happens in more remote colleges where industry is not as prevalent.
  + Assessment for workplace students
  + Some companies feel there is too much paperwork, especially with the EU. Work placement commences with one contract with sign-off by all parties.
  + Globalisation is real and current in education. Most of the Austrian colleges were using the same Cisco Networking Academy teaching resources and hardware that we use in the IT department at Riverina Institute. The Cisco Networking Academy is a great example of a global partnership model for education.

In Austria relationships are formed with complementary organisations through a tradition of workplace training where all VET students must do a work placement that is relevant to their course. The needs of stakeholders are balanced through regular contact in setting up work placements to ensure sustainable relationships that directly relate to industry needs and student outcomes. Quality assurance and continual processes of improvement are managed through mandatory surveys that collect feedback from all stakeholders including students, businesses, teachers and educational leaders. Based on my interviews I suspect that the Austrian business chamber fosters collaboration within Austria.

Tasmania

(Read more on my [blog](http://partnersinveteu.blogspot.com/2016/05/tas-tafe-ict-teaching-department-in.html))

The final stage of my study tour was a visit to the TASTAFE ICT teaching department in Hobart. They are a very progressive department with a good choice of courses that are obviously setting their students up well for jobs. Like Riverina Institute, students are being head-hunted into jobs before they even finish their courses.

They are running an excellent mix of generalist and networking specialist courses. The only different courses from those at Riverina Institute involve systems technology and support which they have chosen to meet local business needs.

Some of the things I discussed with staff there were:

* + a joint program with their electrotechnology department
  + learning hands-on skills with tools as well as IT and telecommunications skills
  + concerns about the future viability of Certificate II courses aimed at digital literacy, as these courses in IT don't really have a job outcome
  + their use of a range of eLearning techniques and tools
  + the role of [TASICT](https://www.tasict.com.au/about/) and what they have achieved for the Tasmanian IT industry.
  + a range of future collaborations for our two departments: assessment validations, resource sharing, comparing delivery models. Read more at [TasTAFE](https://www.tastafe.tas.edu.au/courses/industry/business-and-ict):

Systems for collaboration

The European Union has established several online systems as well as the Cedefop to foster collaboration in VET education across Europe.

*Cedefop*

(Read more on my [blog](http://partnersinveteu.blogspot.com/2016/05/cedefop.html))

Cedefop is the European Centre of the Development of Vocational Training. It works to strengthen European cooperation and provide the evidence on which to base European VET policy. Cedefop’s added value is the high quality of its comparative analyses and expertise gathered through research and networking.

Cedefop works closely with the European Commission, member states’ governments, representatives of employers and trade unions, VET researchers and practitioners. It provides them with up-to-date information on developments in VET as well as opportunities for policy debate. Cedefop disseminates its information through its website, publications, social media, networks, conferences and seminars.

Despite many attempts I couldn't book a site meeting with Cedefop so had to settle for an online analysis based on their extensive website and Facebook page.

Most teachers have heard about Cedefop but are not that aware of the work that they do. I suspect, but need to investigate further, that Cedefop is operating at a much more strategic level focused on European standards and policy rather than at an operational teacher’s level.

*EPALE (Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe)*

(Read more on my [blog](http://partnersinveteu.blogspot.com/2016/05/epale.html))

According to their website, ‘EPALE is a multilingual open membership community for teachers, trainers, researchers, academics, policy makers and anyone else with a professional role in adult learning across Europe. … EPALE is funded by the European Commission, as the latest development in an ongoing commitment to improving the quality of adult learning provision in Europe. … It is set up around the sharing of content related to adult learning, including news, blog posts, resources, and events and courses. Members of the community can engage with adult learning colleagues across Europe through the site’s features, including the forums and by commenting under blogs.’

Most teachers that I met had not heard about EPALE, yet it is full of great articles and ideas. I suspect but need to investigate further that the system is mainly being used by managers and support staff to promote change in education and that teachers hear about the ideas through their support leaders.

*Erasmus+*

(Read more on my [blog](http://partnersinveteu.blogspot.com/2016/05/erasmus-is-eus-programme-to-support.html))

Erasmus+ is the EU's program to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe and provides opportunities for more than four million Europeans to study, train, gain experience and volunteer abroad. The aim of Erasmus+ is to contribute to the Europe 2020 strategy for growth, jobs, social equity and inclusion. Erasmus+ also aims to promote the sustainable development of its partners in the field of higher education, and contribute to achieving the objectives of the EU Youth Strategy.

Almost every teacher has heard of the Erasmus+ program and knows of examples where teachers and students have taken part in the exchange program.

*Systems for collaboration conclusion*

Collaborative systems, tools and techniques are obviously essential in supporting communication with stakeholders who are spread across geography, language and time zones, but I think it’s important to note that they are most successful where there is some personal contact to establish a relationship.

Study Tour Conclusions

Study tours and exchange programs are a brilliant opportunity to open one’s eyes to the strengths and weaknesses of their own, as well as other, countries. This provides an opportunity to focus on positive steps to move forward. I am exceptionally grateful for this opportunity and hope that my research and recommendations can help other educators.

Australia already has excellent teaching practices and many great initiatives we can share that I'm sure other countries would be happy to learn from. The following examples of innovations from the IT department at Riverina Institute can create an opportunity for international collaborations:

* + project-based learning
  + the IT Pathway program, a fully integrated partnership between TAFE and Charles Sturt University
  + ELearning models and templates to make it easier for teachers to get online
  + community consultation through Talking Tech Riverina
  + support workshops with peer support models

The common lesson learnt from Finland and Austria is that collaboration requires purpose. In a perfect world we would all work together for purely altruistic reasons, but in the real world most of us require a sense of urgency to promote the desire to work together to a necessity to work together now.

Colleges, employers and community leaders need to communicate and help each other when they share a common purpose of managing workplace learning. Having worked together for their common purpose it is then easier to extend those conversations around training needs for industry and community. When teachers and community leaders become comfortable working together for a common purpose they are also more likely to grow their networks through introductions and referrals to friends.

My study tour to Europe has convinced me that workplace learning brings very substantial benefits to both employers and colleges. The Austrian experience and input from the business chamber forces me to conclude that workplace learning also brings very substantial economic benefits at an industry and national level.

To build complementary partnerships with businesses and by extension contribute to best practice and enhance the strengths of TAFE NSW, we need to promote workplace learning. Workplace learning then becomes the mechanism to achieve our other goals:

* + developing workplace assessments to encourage workplace learning
  + developing community partnerships to promote and support education
  + working with industry skills councils to ensure that training packages encourage workplace learning
  + promoting the professional status of teaching as a career.

The following recommendations provide specific detail on how I believe these goals can be achieved.

Recommendations

* + Develop workplace assessments to promote workplace learning by:
  + actively seeking community projects where our students can work within their communities
  + identifying barriers and solutions to workplace assessment
  + training and resourcing assessment experts who are qualified and experienced in Training Services NSW and ASQA requirements
  + developing templates for workplace assessments that define the evidence that needs to be collected and who needs to verify it
  + developing eLearning models and templates to promote online evidence collection for workplace assessments
  + working with employers to ensure that the projects students complete are relevant to the workplace and prepare them to be productive future employees
  + Develop community partnerships to promote and support education by:
  + promoting a culture of social partnerships where communities and education providers work together for the benefit of their communities
  + broadening our definition of communities and ensuring that we don't exclude people from their opportunity and responsibility to contribute to education. Our definitions of community need to cover business groups, town/regional governance, educators and cultural groups
  + Taking practical steps like making more time to meet with business chambers, shire councils, schools, libraries and community and cultural groups
  + Promote the professional status of teaching as a career by:
  + continuing to recruit and train great teachers, and then trusting them and showing respect for their time and judgement
  + making sure that our systems and processes are no more complex or time consuming than absolutely necessary so teachers have the time to commit to quality review and consultative work
  + promoting international exchange programs for overseas students and teachers to come to Australia. As a safe English-speaking country with a strong educational system, we would be very sought after for international exchange students
  + developing collaborations with other VET providers, especially where we can develop partnerships rather than competitive relationships.

1. [Talking Tech Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/talkingtechriverina/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [IT Pathway website](http://www.itpathway.com.au/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)