

Scholarship Opportunity: Masters Thesis by research (possible upgrade to PhD)

The Partnership

Associate Professor Robyn Broadbent and Associate Professor Theo Papadopoulos of Victoria University have a partnership with Dr Tim Corney and Dr Karin du Plessis of the Incolink Foundation Fund (IFF).

Incolink, established by unions and employers in the Victorian building and construction industry, offers through its charitable trust a range of personal support and counselling services that aim to address issues that people in the building and construction industry encounter, at work and in their personal lives. The services include suicide prevention, intervention and postvention, counselling and chaplaincy, critical incidence response, debt crisis and financial counselling, drug and alcohol services, apprentice support, employment and training services, careers counselling and advice, and health and wellbeing programs.

Victoria University has a long and productive working relationship with Incolink and have been successful in gaining research funds to support this project.

Masters Supervisors

Both Robyn and Theo have been instrumental in leading research on youth service models through their work with Visy Cares Hub and their more substantive Victorian government policy work (Broadbent, R, Papadopoulos, T, et al, Broadbent, R., 2009, Broadbent, R., Papadopoulos, T., 2009, Broadbent, R, Papadopoulos, T., et al, 2008). They bring a distinct set of skills to this research as well as a strong background in their particular areas of expertise. Robyn is a sociologist and a qualitative researcher with responsibility for interviews and focus groups. Theo is a quantitative researcher, with responsibility for survey design and evaluation. Combined they have managed complex research projects that require an evidence base generated from both sets of methodologies.

Tim and Karin, who will also play a significant role in the research, are also accomplished researchers in their own right with a particular focus and expertise on young working people and apprentices. They will also bring a set of expertise that will ensure the student is well supported.

The Funds

The project is offering a student who may wish to undertake their masters by research full time a \$10,000 scholarship per year for 2 years. The student will also be able to apply for an RTS place to fund their HECS cost. They will be well supported in this application. It is hoped the research will form the basis of a more substantial grant and the possibility of upgrading to a PhD.

Applications Process

Applications are currently being accepted and should outline your work experience, evidence of your academic record and a statement about why this project interests you. Applications will remain open until 1 August 2012. To be eligible for a Masters by Research candidature you must fulfil the following;

You must have a Bachelors degree with a Distinction average in the final year, or equivalent qualification or professional experience demonstrating a capacity to undertake a Masters by research.

You must also demonstrate competency in English sufficient to work at a masters level by providing evidence of one or more of the following:

- completion of one or more degrees with English as the language of instruction and assessment, and undertaken in a predominantly English-speaking context
- you have an overall band score of not less than 6.5 in an International English Language Testing Service (IELTS) test with no individual band score below 6.0
- you achieved a score of not less than 92 with no section score less than 22 in the internet-based Teaching of English Foreign Language (TOEFL) test, or English proficiency equivalent
- demonstrate competence in English equivalent to above

Research Project Introduction

In total 72,000 apprentices started a trade apprenticeship in 2009, and it is estimated that 46.2% will complete their apprenticeship. Attrition has a detrimental affect across the community, including wastage of government resources, trade skill shortages and the implications of under-skilled or unskilled people in the labour market (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). A number of factors that contribute to attrition have been identified – workplace conditions such as bullying, dislike of job, low wages etc. However, recent research indicates that underlying these factors are low levels of ‘life skills’ amongst apprentices. This study will identify and examine the support services available to construction apprentices and the current usage patterns by young people and the number of referrals made by VET staff. This research project will specifically focus on the manner in which apprentice support systems play a dynamic role in retention.

Young men’s health and well-being.

There has not been a systematic study of what support systems are available to apprentices and what types of support services are delivering the best outcomes for apprentices. Currently the lack of retention of apprentices poses a large cost to the economy. When caused by poor health and wellbeing there is a significant social and economic cost borne by local communities.

The proposed research project is intended to fill the gap in the existing body of research and provide a platform for change in both policy and practice in the VET sector. This research, to be collaboratively undertaken by Incolink and Victoria University, is well situated to inform practice. Both these organisations are involved in the management and provision of support services to apprentices whilst they are in their workplaces. The learning from this research will inform continuing improvement in apprentice service provision to delivery better health and wellbeing outcomes, improve retention and underpin the development of a more robust building and construction industry workforce that is essential to the economic viability of local and national economies.

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the full spectrum of support services available to apprentices in the building and construction industry, their effectiveness and the manner in which they interrelate in terms of apprenticeship retention, as well as how these services are perceived by VET stakeholders. By fully understanding the support services and the manner in which support is delivered, apprentice support can be enhanced, with a view to further enhancing apprentice retention and addressing skill shortages in the construction industry.

- The project will examine the support services that are in place, both within the training system and through employers, but also more broadly in relation to apprentice welfare.
- Apprentice perspectives and experiences of support services will contribute an important service-user perspective.
- The project will include a qualitative component to allow for the development of a comprehensive understanding of support services provided by all relevant stakeholders (e.g., TAFE teachers, TAFE welfare/counselling services, employers, apprentice field officers, and union/employer association representatives)
- By developing a clear understanding of support structures and their interrelationships, as well as how to best support apprentices, apprentice retention, and alongside it industry skill shortages, can be enhanced.

❖ **Key research topics and question to be addressed**

- How do building and construction industry apprentices perceive the existing support services?
- What are the interrelationships between various support structures available to apprentices in the building and construction industry, both within the training system and through employers, but also more widely in relation to apprentice welfare?
- What are the strengths and deficiencies of current support services?

❖ **Methodology**

The research will follow a mixed methods methodology using both quantitative and qualitative data gathering techniques in a complementary way to develop a full understanding of apprentice support systems. By including both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, cross-validation of the comparable data findings can be achieved and the two methods can produce findings which complement each other (Hesse-Biber, 2010). To develop a full understanding of the apprentice support systems from a range of perspectives, qualitative data will first be gathered through focus groups and individual interviews. Once the researchers have developed a thorough understanding of the relevant variables a survey will be developed based on the qualitative findings. The survey will aim determine the statistical strength of the variables in relation to each other.