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Third Sector Workforce Dilemmas
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This research explored the current demand-supply disjuncture for appropriately qualified and experienced staff for community services and addressed the question – How can a local service sector respond locally to this emerging issue?

In 2006 the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare undertook a review of the available literature on the community services workforce and identified shortages of qualified staff and skill deficits among current staff as common themes (Vaughn 2006). The Australian Community Sector Survey (Queensland) (2006) also found that (58%) of respondents indicated that they experienced difficulties in attracting appropriately qualified staff in the previous year. While workforce development has emerged as an area of research interest within organisation studies there is little focus on third sector

organization workforces which is a critical component of community services workforce development. Nonprofit organizations are major providers of government funded community services alongside some government provision in mainly statutory areas.

There are four aspects to workforce issues: a quantity concern (planning the workforce), a quality (training the workforce), a performance issue (managing the workforce) (De Geyndt 2000) and a context issue (sustaining and retaining the workforce). There are also three types of responses to these issues: longer term strategies to attract workers with a focus on reward and satisfaction; longer term strategies to enable structural change in the community services sector and workforce; and strategies to develop the capacity of organizations and individuals in the short term to deal with the shortfall in qualified and experienced staff. The predominant focus in literature and policy is on the long term response that involves workforce planning, structural change and strategies to 'attract' in order to affect the demand-supply disjuncture. Little attention has been given to short term strategies to support local 'agency'/action.

This research involved a cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason 2001) between a regional university and local community service providers to map the local experience of the current demand-supply disjuncture of appropriately qualified and experienced staff; identify and develop local 'agency'/action to support capacity-building of individuals and organisations within the context of key national and state strategic initiatives; and develop a wider research and action agenda in partnership. A co-operative inquiry group was established to share experiences of (and local strategies to tackle) issues relating to the current demand-supply disjuncture. Data was collected through participant observation in, and audio-taping of, the group dialogue. Interested senior managers from Cairns-based community service agencies and JCU researchers formed the group. The main process used within the group was exploration of strategies developed to date and proposed in response to the issue. The data included information on the nature and extent of the local issue and strategies and findings from the shared inquiries of the co-operative group. The data set was analysed for local themes in constant comparison with national and international themes. The findings informed immediate local practice and the development of a targeted research and development agenda in partnership with local community service agencies.