

Changing organisational practices to meet the needs of Indigenous students in mainstream VET

Jo Balatti James Cook University

Martha Goldman Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE

Abstract

The last ten years in particular have seen a large increase in Indigenous participation in VET especially in mainstream programs. This increasingly significant clientele has demanded changes to the way that training organisations work at the grassroots level in terms of delivery, support, management and administration. This paper reports on some of the more important changes that VET providers have implemented to deliver mainstream courses more effectively to Indigenous students. It then suggests further changes that need to take place and identifies organisational factors that seem to impede the implementation of such change. The paper draws on a recently completed NCVET funded action research project aimed at improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream VET courses.

Introduction

The increasing number of Indigenous enrolments in VET including mainstream VET indicates that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education related policies of the last ten years have had some success. However the rate of completions of those enrolments continues to be of concern (ANTA, 1998). While we acknowledge the debates explicated elsewhere around the definition of the term “completion” and even its value as an indicator of success (Boughton & Durnan, 1997), this paper begins with the assumption that the lower than average completion rates of modules or of courses are not as good as they could be. While we also acknowledge that the reasons for both completions and non-completions are many, varied, complex and overlapping (Robinson & Bamblett, 1998) the second assumption we make is that some of the reasons for non-completions are located inside the operations of VET providers.

This paper draws on a study across four TAFE institutes that used an action research process (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) to identify organisational reasons for Indigenous non-completions in mainstream programs and, where possible, to improve practice. The practical problem-solving activity of the action research teams over a twelve-month period (2002) revealed practices that were having a positive effect and practices that seemed to be impacting adversely. Moreover, in their attempts to change practices at the grass-roots level, the teams learnt more about the factors that impeded quality provision and the process of change itself.

Here we report some of the more important findings by grouping them in three categories. In the first category we identify some of the relatively recent changes to organisational practice that seem to be effective in providing quality training to Indigenous students in mainstream programs. The second category identifies organisationally related factors that are directly or indirectly adversely affecting quality service delivery to Indigenous

students. In the third category we list specific changes to practice that, in the view of the participants of this study, would have a positive impact.

For the purposes of providing a context in which to reflect on the practices reported here, we begin with a statistical snapshot of Indigenous participation in VET. We then review some major research studies that made recommendations for organisational change in order to improve Indigenous students' experiences of VET.

Background

Indigenous students doing vocational education and training in 2000 totalled 51 700 and comprised 3% of the VET student population. This represented an increase of over 60% from the 1996 figure of 31 900. Furthermore, the percentage of Indigenous students enrolled in enabling courses and other non-vocational specific courses dropped to 23% from 35% over the same period. This was still double the percentage of the total Year 2000 student population enrolled in programs in the VET Multi-field education. The percentage enrolled in AQF III or higher was also lower than that of the total population—32% in comparison to 41% (NCVER, 2002).

Indigenous students also experienced lower pass rates and higher withdrawal and failure rates than other VET students. The most recent figures (NCVER, 2002) reported that in 2000, successful completions of subject enrolments for Indigenous students was 66% but for VET students overall it was 80%. Similarly, the Indigenous withdrawal rate in 2000 was 15.4% whereas the withdrawal rate for the total student population was 8.7%.

Since the introduction of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy in 1989 the participation of Indigenous people in VET has improved dramatically. The improvements can be attributed to many factors related to government policies, community attitudes and the organisational practice of VET providers. Nevertheless, the statistics above indicate that more improvement is required.

In terms of the VET provider's impact, one of the first significant research studies devoted to identifying factors affecting Indigenous participation in VET listed a number of recommendations (McIntyre et al, 1996). It recommended that VET providers should conceptualise course delivery as a cross-cultural activity; that providers should ensure that every aspect of their course from administration to assessment be culturally appropriate; that providers attend to language and literacy related issues; that professional development programs be developed in consultation with appropriate indigenous groups and finally that providers should evaluate all aspects of their course delivery.

Three years later, a field study comprising 16 TAFE institutes recommended more areas for change (Robinson & Hughes, 1999). The study concluded that, in general, TAFE institutes were not responding effectively to an environment where most of its Indigenous students were in mainstream courses (over 60%) rather than in Indigenous specific courses. Its main suggestions included:

- More effective links between Indigenous education units and other academic structures responsible for course design need to be forged.

- The number of Indigenous staff members in teaching and management positions needs to be increased.
- The Indigenous Education Units need to develop effective strategies to support all Indigenous students and not only those who are doing Indigenous specific courses.
- Better quality data needs to be collected on Indigenous students' perceptions of courses and on non-completions. Existing data collections need to be utilised more effectively.
- Strategies need to be developed to address poorer pass rates and higher attrition rates of Indigenous students.
- Importance given to job outcomes by TAFE institutes and their Indigenous education units needs to increase.

The study

This study was conducted in four TAFE institutes in Central and North Queensland whose Indigenous student populations range from 7% to 26% of the total student population. The Indigenous clientele served is very diverse comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students ranging in age from school leavers to mature aged students and living in urban, regional, rural and remote settings.

An action research team in each institute investigated practices at a program and/or institution level that impact on Indigenous completion rates. The team members determined the focus and scope of their team. Three of the teams chose vocational teaching areas as their focus. One chose the carpentry apprentices in the Torres Strait who receive onsite training from a trainer who regularly flies the two-hour trip from Cairns. A second chose a sports and recreation program that was delivered in residential block mode on campus. The third concentrated on a prevocational construction course delivered on site by a trainer who travelled 150 kms weekly to a small Indigenous community of 200 people in remote North West Queensland. This team was also interested in the delivery of the Literacy, Language and Numeracy program to jobseekers on campus. The fourth action research team focussed on the support services available to the Indigenous students in mainstream courses on their campus.

Each team comprised six to eight core members who were administrators, Indigenous students, teachers, support officers, managers and community members. All four teams included a team facilitator/researcher and an Indigenous Education and Cultural Adviser employed by the institutes. Criteria for team composition were diversity and relevance.

The key features of the action research methodology used in this study draw significantly on the work of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). They identify the four "moments" of an action research approach to addressing a common concern by a group of stakeholders as: group members *plan action* together; they *act and observe* individually or collectively; they *reflect* together and then they *reformulate more critically informed plans* deliberately together. This cycle is repeated the necessary number of times for the group's common concern to be adequately addressed.

The main sources of data for the project were agendas, minutes and taped recordings of

all meetings held by the teams, two sets of semi-structured interviews conducted in the beginning of the project and toward the end with project participants, managers and directors and journals kept by the action research team facilitators.

Data was analysed using narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) and thematic analysis. Findings described in this paper are not reported necessarily because of their commonality across all four institutes. Their importance is determined by virtue of their significance in one or more cases and for their potential value in identifying similar organisational practices and factors that may be relevant elsewhere.

One significant limitation to the study is that it is confined to four cases of the one category of provider, that is, TAFE. It does not include for example, private providers or the Aboriginal community-controlled colleges that constitute an alternative to the mainstream education system. This limitation results in a cluster of organisations involved in the study that are fundamentally similar. While this has certain advantages it also has the limitations that come with operating within the one model.

Findings and discussion

Practices having a positive impact on Indigenous mainstream training

Creating mainstream space for Indigenous issues, staff and students

The changing student demographics along with changing funding arrangements have had all four institutes grapple in different ways with the challenge of establishing managerial, administrative and teaching structures and practices that meet the needs of Indigenous students in mainstream. Changes in the role of the Indigenous Education Unit (the Unit) and its relationship to the rest of the organisation constitute an important part of the response. Many of these changes were aimed at more effective integration of the services offered by the Unit with those of the rest of the organisation.

The introduction of the Indigenous Education Unit (or its equivalent) as an element of the TAFE institute structure was designed to carve out a piece of organisational space dedicated to providing an entry point for Indigenous people into formal VET. Generally speaking its purpose has been to provide the Indigenous face of the institute to the community in terms of generating business, delivering courses and supporting students. For staff and students alike—and to some extent even for the Indigenous community as a whole—the existence of the Unit has provided the hub around which a sense of belonging has developed in the relatively foreign landscape of the VET sector.

While the Units have produced many positive outcomes, their funding arrangements and their design carry drawbacks that are being felt in attempts to effectively service Indigenous students in mainstream programs. For the most part, funding for the Units has been federal with almost all of the positions being on a contractual basis requiring renewal every year. Lack of security and career pathways has contributed to turnover of staff, little or no succession planning, understaffing for lengthy periods of time and limited professional development opportunities. In some instances, instability of leadership within Units in the midst of a changing environment has led to issues of accountability, unclear and/or outdated role definitions especially of the Indigenous

Student Support Officers and a loss of focus. The highest level of management in the Units has tended to be that of Unit co-ordinator with no direct voice at the executive level of management. In this respect the Indigenous Education Unit has acquired over time the status of an appendage relative to the main body of the organisation rather than being integrated into it.

With the exception of one institute in which the Indigenous Education Unit has developed into its largest income-producing faculty and thus has, in some ways, become “mainstream”, the Units in the other institutes are undergoing change. Resistance to change is strongest where there is the perceived threat of the Unit being “dissolved” as a structure and/or entity.

Below are some of the generally well-received measures taken by the institutes to better integrate the functions of the Indigenous Education Unit with the rest of the organisation. Clearly not all measures were taken by any one institute.

- The coordinator of the Unit is directly accountable to the Director of the institute.
- The management of the Unit is in the portfolio of an Indigenous Director who is also responsible for several “mainstream” vocational teaching areas.
- Programs that were once delivered by the Unit are now being delivered by vocational teaching areas in mainstream. In this case, the Unit now has predominantly community liaison, business generation and student support functions.
- There are some teachers (including Indigenous teachers) who teach in mainstream as well as in Indigenous Specific Programs thus forming inter-departmental links.
- Indigenous Field Officers and Support Officers are working closely with delivery teams in mainstream.

Utilising off-site collaborative modes of delivery

Ability to deliver training off campus has permitted many Indigenous people to access training that previously was out of reach geographically or culturally. Taking training to the home communities of Indigenous students has proved to be effective providing that the appropriate collaborative relationships between TAFE, the community, employers and any relevant government agencies are in place. In addition to successful completions, another positive outcome has been the readiness to experience training and/or work in larger centres which previously would have proved a daunting prospect

The complexity of such an arrangement is illustrated by the delivery of training to a group of men in a remote Indigenous community. In addition to the vocational trainer and the students, other important parties to the arrangement were Centrelink, the CDEP co-ordinator, the Indigenous tutor, the integrated literacy teacher, the Indigenous Field Officer, community elders, a local community member who was the program mentor, and institute management staff.

Practices having an adverse impact on Indigenous mainstream training

Compartmentalising operations

Findings common to all four action research teams strongly indicate that quality delivery

of training to Indigenous students in mainstream courses requires collaboration across a number of departments and service delivery teams in an institute. A quality program may require collaboration between the vocational teaching team, the Indigenous Student Support Officer, the Indigenous Field Officer, the literacy team, administration, corporate services and other support services such library and computer access. Such collaboration is impeded by an organisational structure that is compartmentalised with an under-developed capacity for building links and working relationships across departments, teaching teams and units. The negative impact of such compartmentalisation is exacerbated by the absence of a position description that includes in its portfolio the learning well-being of Indigenous students in mainstream courses *as a group* and the coordination of relevant cross-institutional processes and professional development to service those students.

The deleterious consequences of such an organisational structure are numerous and here we provide a few merely by way of illustration. A compartmentalised structure inhibits attending to problems that may require interdisciplinary and inter-departmental solutions. One instance of this had several teams at one institute independently having conversations and investing effort in the production of Indigenous cultural awareness guides with no awareness that colleagues in other departments and faculties were doing likewise. This clearly showed a need for the guide but it also illustrated the lack of a concerted institutional response.

Another common cross-departmental problem is mitigating the negative impact reported by some students of finding themselves to be the only Indigenous people in a group. While in some mainstream classes the majority of students may be Indigenous, it is more common to find very few Indigenous students in any given mainstream class. Unlike students enrolled in courses conducted through the Indigenous Education Unit who find themselves formally and informally with other Indigenous students, these students have no or limited opportunities to meet as a group. Time-tabling issues and the lack of someone to coordinate such meetings are the major impediments. Consequently the sense of solidarity amongst students in a similar situation and the moral support that this engenders are generally not available to Indigenous students in mainstream programs.

The general lack of a “critical mass” of Indigenous students in any given mainstream program leads to another adverse consequence for these students. Rarely, if ever, is their combined voice concerning their experience, expectations, difficulties and suggestions for change sought by the organisation. For some students their first experience of being asked as a group what they thought about their experiences came through the activity of the action research team in their institute.

Arguably the most pertinent legacy of the compartmentalisation style of operation that prevails in TAFE organisations is the general lack of connection between the Indigenous Education Unit (the Unit) and the rest of the institute. Until recent times, Indigenous related matters were for the most part relegated to the Unit. As one Director explained, “In the past, any request, query, survey, any piece of correspondence that came across our table to do with Indigenous *anything*, we would send it across to the Unit”.

The Indigenous Student Support Officer (ISSO), in particular, is now feeling the brunt of this historical disconnection. The role includes servicing *all* Indigenous students but for some ISSOs this is proving to be difficult. Some ISSOs are suffering from a lack of systemised knowledge about the Indigenous student population in mainstream. In cases where the ISSO is not given the names of the students and the modules in which they are enrolled, it makes it very difficult if not impossible for the ISSO to effectively service those students. Some ISSOs who for many years have worked only with students and teachers in Indigenous specific courses are also experiencing difficulty in relating to a wider range of teachers in mainstream. Missing are the relationships, the informal opportunities to interact, and effective systems for teachers and the ISSOs to be responsive to student needs.

The absence of connection between the Indigenous Education Unit and the faculties is also being felt by the teachers and managers in mainstream who, with little relevant experiential and cultural knowledge, are now finding themselves working with Indigenous communities and students. In an attempt to build links, a staff member of one Indigenous Education Unit has established the practice of attending the weekly meetings of a delivery team whose business includes a large number of Indigenous students. This action was prompted by the Indigenous Education Unit's desire to reduce the number of complaints—mainly to do with communication—it was receiving from the community about the training.

An organisational structure that produces internal isolationism leads to a lack of communication and collaboration across departments, units and teams. This in turn provides that opportunity for different and sometimes conflicting beliefs to develop within the organisation about what it means to provide good training.

Absence of shared beliefs about how to best service Indigenous clientele

Effective collaboration requires agreed upon beliefs amongst all stakeholders about what it means to provide a quality training experience to Indigenous students. In circumstances where there are not commonly shared beliefs the training experience can be compromised.

The resulting intra-organisational tension and absence of common purpose are well illustrated in the following piece of dialogue. Two staff members are discussing the contentious issue of TAFE providing a door-to-door bus service to students in an area where there is no public transport. The service had been withdrawn and replaced with a generic bus route i.e., the bus picks up and drops off students at pre-arranged bus stops. The change has resulted in a decrease in the number of students attending their training. The bus service is mostly utilised by Indigenous students. One staff member is a teacher and the other is responsible for resource management:

Teacher: If you don't pick them up at their doorstep they won't come. I had a student – she came in to do the test last week. She wanted to get a driver's licence. I said Okay. I said to come in on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday of this week. The bus forgot her on the Monday and then she rang up to say the bus hadn't come on the Tuesday and today she wasn't here. And what's likely to happen next time is the bus driver will probably just

whiz past if she's not there waiting at the stop. The confidence and the self-esteem play a big part because if you haven't got the confidence to wait outside.... And then again, she might have just changed her mind and decided she didn't want to come today.

Manager: That's fine but aren't we trying to mature these people into a situation where one day they may be employable? How many employers pick up their workers at their doorstep every day? We've got to give these people some responsibility. I don't think it's much to ask them to walk from their door to the bus stop. It's a very expensive service for us for a start—maintaining and running a bus.

In the above example the protagonists are from different sections of the organisation. The different sub-cultures that exist within an organisation may, in part, help explain their clashing beliefs. However, conflicts also arise within more organisationally homogenous groups such as amongst teachers and even amongst teachers within the same faculty. A common source of argument continues to be around the maxim expressed by an action research team member as: "Doing the right thing means treating everyone the same—whether they are black, white or brindle".

A common interpretation of this has teachers on the one hand believing that the TAFE learning experience should provide a scaffold to the workplace. From this perspective, delivering training requires sensitivity to different cultures and different life circumstances for effective learning experiences to take place. These teachers would argue that doing the "right thing" requires individual responses to student needs. On the other hand, there are teachers who believe that the TAFE training experience should mimic as much as possible the workplace experience including practices such as clocking on and off. These teachers would maintain that they are not doing Indigenous students any favours by treating them differently from other "mainstream" students. It would not be preparing them for the realities of the workplace.

Another common interpretation of the same maxim involves what it means to provide culturally appropriate training. One view maintains that culturally appropriate training occurs when the trainer employs culturally sensitive professional practices that result in Indigenous students successfully completing their modules in mainstream programs. The other view defines culturally appropriate training as being this and much more. Its proponents would regard culturally appropriate training as training that also capitalises on and develops the cultural capital that Indigenous students possess to varying degrees. They would argue that mainstream programs that do not offer and even encourage students to do culturally related modules are culturally inappropriate. Such programs are "whiting out" knowledges and skills that although not mainstream are nevertheless valuable in an Indigenous student's family and work life. In fact, it is argued that mainstream programs that exclude developing cultural expertise are not adequately preparing Indigenous students for work in the many Indigenous organisations or communities that provide employment opportunities.

As well as beliefs about what it means to best service Indigenous students being shaped by personal and professional judgements, they are also shaped by government policies and regulations under which teachers and managers are required to operate. One set of

policies that strongly influences the attitudes and beliefs brought to training delivery concerns how training is funded.

Lack of financial incentives to increase completion rates in mainstream courseszz

Most funding for training delivery is based on enrolments rather than on completions. This emphasis can lead to a focus on “signing up” people at the expense of providing the most appropriate learning experience for any given learner. One teacher explained the dilemma when signing up students in her program. Past experience had taught her delivery team that up to 80% of students sign up without adequate understanding of what the course entails and of their own aspirations. In response, the team had put in place a process that aimed at producing more informed choices. This included one-one interviews with all students and the completion of written questionnaires. The process was also intended to screen out people for whom, in the view of the trainers, the course was not suitable. The delivery team believed that the screening function had been compromised because of the business pressure to meet the minimum requirement of enrolments to run the program and in fact, to have as many enrolments as possible. This was confirmed when the students who dropped out of the course (approximately 50%) were surveyed. The mismatch between student needs and/or capabilities and course content and/or demands was one of the main reasons for students not completing the one-year program.

Recommendations for change

The impediments to the delivery of quality training listed above suggest change may be required in a number of organisational systems. Here we list some specific changes to practice for improving training delivery to Indigenous students in mainstream programs.

Collecting quality data and making it easily accessible at the grassroots level

The use of existing data and data collection methods need to be reviewed. Although institutes collect data to meet state and national requirements this study has found that existing data—at least concerning indigenous participation at the institute, campus or program level at least—are not easily accessible to staff and even when they are accessible, they do not seem to be used to effect changes at the grass-roots level.

In the exploration of their topics the action research teams also identified the need for a lot of data that are not being sought in culturally appropriate ways. For example even when standard feedback sheets at the end of programs or “Reason for Leaving” forms were completed, they were found not to give very useful data at all. Group interviews, telephone calls, peer review, group discussions facilitated by a trusted “outsider” all proved to be more effective ways of collecting useful information.

Making cultural awareness training an institute commitment

The responsibility of organising cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication training for staff members needs to be included in a position description. Participants in the study unanimously agreed on the importance of such training for personnel at *all* levels of the institute especially directors, managers, teachers and trainers. They also concurred that cultural awareness training packages such as the *Mura Ama Wakaana* “*Working Together*” cultural awareness program for the Queensland Public Sector are

not a “cure-all”. During the year the research project took place cultural awareness training did not occur for any new or existing staff members in any of the four institutes. In general cultural awareness training has not been considered a professional development requirement to be co-ordinated and funded through Human Resources. When it has occurred, the Indigenous Education Unit has usually organised and sought funding for it. In addition to cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication training, teachers new to working in remote communities expressed the need for a very practical induction conducted by experienced teachers (often found in other Vocational training areas or faculties) and by the staff from the Indigenous Education Unit.

Improving professional expertise

Professional development for staff working with Indigenous students is needed. The increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream courses has revealed a lack of relevant expertise in many administrators, managers, and teachers alike. There are managers who do not acknowledge that some Indigenous students need additional support. Of those who do, there are some who do not have the knowledge to advise their staff of the funding sources available for support. There are vocational teachers and trainers who have little or no experience in working with the diverse range of Indigenous students they encounter. Many are aware of their lack of expertise but others are not.

There are teachers who have a limited understanding of language, literacy and numeracy and of working with Indigenous people for whom English is a second language. While teachers recognise the value of integrating literacy training with vocational training, lack of opportunity and skills by vocational and literacy teachers in working collaboratively is hampering progress.

Conclusion

This research has shown that the issues highlighted in the McIntyre (1996) and Robinson and Hughes’ (1999) studies continue to be pertinent. The “place” (Robinson & Hughes, 1999) of Indigenous peoples—students, staff and community—in vocational education and training is in an ongoing state of renegotiation. With this comes the tension that accompanies an organisation that needs to change but which at the same time tries to resist. At a systems level the tension is caused by challenges to the institutional ethnocentrism inherent in the structures and processes of a mainstream organisation that is overwhelming shaped by non-Indigenous ways of thinking, doing and valuing. At the team and individual level, the tension comes about in great part from overlapping but not identical sets of beliefs, values and norms about what it means to learn, what it means to be a TAFE student, what it means to be an employee in TAFE and ultimately, what it means to provide excellent learning experiences for Indigenous students.

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