

Gaining acceptance for accredited training for university staff

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Abstract

Many enterprises within Australia have become Registered Training Organisations, or work very closely with RTOs, to deliver nationally-accredited training to their workers. Universities are major employers, yet relatively few are taking advantage of accredited training opportunities. This paper reports on the experience of a regional university's initial activity as an enterprise RTO. In so doing it reflects on academic attitudes to competency-based training, traditional university staff development attitudes and practices, the 'who pays' debate, and the organisational implications of the presence of an RTO within an enterprise.

Introduction

This paper examines the introduction of accredited training for staff within a regional university. Many Australian enterprises have chosen to become Registered Training Organisations in order to award their workers qualifications for in-house training which is undertaken. While several universities have become RTOs – and indeed some are dual sector institutions – it is not common for the RTO status to be used to any great extent for the benefit of staff, as opposed to students, of the university. The paper details the initial efforts in a regional university to use its recently acquired RTO status to accredit training of staff.

Literature review

Accredited training in enterprises

The VET sector began moving to a competency-based system in the late 1980s (Smith & Keating, 1997). By 1997, VET qualifications were becoming gathered into industry Training Packages which consist of units of competence gathered into national qualifications; by 2003 around 80 Training Packages were endorsed (Smith, 2002). The units of competence in Training Packages are written in such a way that workplace delivery is easily managed; in fact it is argued that institutional delivery of Training Packages is more difficult than workplace delivery (Boorman, 2002). They are therefore popular with enterprises, especially those large enterprises which have chosen to become accredited as Registered Training Organisations through the opening of the training market in VET. Even before Training Packages, many large enterprises were delivering accredited training to their workers (Smith & Smith, 1998); such delivery takes place either through their own training organisations, or in partnership with institutional RTOs (Callan & Ashworth, forthcoming).

Attitudes of universities to competency-based training (CBT)

Even within the VET sector, the hegemony of competency-based training has been highly contested. Opposition has come from different quarters. Jackson (1993) has criticised CBT as being related to economic rationalism; Smith *et al* (1997) have noted problems teachers have had in delivering it; and Billett *et al* (1999) have noted that CBT is not good at delivering higher-order skills and flexibility among workers. In the early days of the current wave of CBT, competency standards were developed for professional groups traditionally taught in the university sector, such as nurses, teachers (in the USA) and pharmacists (Leveratt, 1993). However universities were generally hostile to competency-based training (Hager, 1992) and thus a decade ago it gradually became clear that the VET sector and the higher education sector in Australia would be proceeding down very different paths in relation to teaching of students.

University staff development for general and academic staff

Universities thus rejected competency-based training for their students, and there is little evidence that the notion has been considered seriously for training of staff within universities. In general, staff training at universities is still in its relative infancy. Academic staff development is currently gaining a higher profile, although departments providing such training are constantly challenged by a viewpoint that university teaching and assessment should be learned through reflection on practice and discussion rather than through training activities (Hicks, 2002). Staff development of 'general' or 'support' staff (ie non-academics) is often relatively ignored, with a perception that they are disadvantaged against academics as regards training (Herron, 1998). In general the complex relationships of different departments within universities, lack of corporate-style human resource practices, and the position of university staff as providers rather than receivers of education leads to a lack of emphasis upon staff development relative to other industry sectors (Sunderland & Vulliamy, 1999).

The development of the RTO at the university in this study

As at some other Australian universities, the initial move to create an RTO within the university came from the Education Faculty which offers a range courses for VET practitioners. The VET teaching section wished to embed qualifications in Assessment and Workplace Training within its degree and graduate diploma VET courses. Initially an arrangement was made through another RTO, but over a period of several years accredited status was explored and finally attained for an autonomous RTO situated within the commercial arm of the university. RTO status was attained in early 2002, and because of the introduction of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) registration had to be renewed within twelve months. This entailed a great deal of detailed attention to assessment and reporting issues; as in other RTOs (Smith & Brennan, 2002), the process, while difficult, proved instructive. The appointment of a new Acting Director of the commercial arm of the university in mid-2002 enabled developments relating to the RTO to proceed more rapidly after a period without a Director.

Other Faculties (not just Education) were seeking to explore embedding of VET qualifications within their university-level awards, and also to explore the possibilities

of income-earning VET courses within their discipline areas. As well as the discipline-based courses, though, senior staff within the university were interested in the possibility of offering accredited training to staff. The RTO's Advisory Committee therefore contained representatives not only from Faculties but also from operational Divisions within the university.

At the time of writing the RTO had only one qualification on its scope, the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, but was awaiting an audit visit from the State Accreditation Body to add five further qualifications. Two of these, the Certificates I and II in Information Technology, were intended for the accreditation of staff training. Three were for the use of Faculties in teaching students, and were in the Health and Education areas. The State Accreditation Body was, at the time of the research, taking six months to process renewals of registration and additions to scope.

Research method

Three research methods were utilised. The first was a review of documentation (Spindler & Spindler, 1992) associated with the RTO, including the minutes of the RTO's Advisory Committee and internal papers produced concerning the use of the RTO for accreditation of staff training. In conjunction with formal documentation, notes taken at meetings where the RTO was discussed were consulted. The practice of using notes from meetings subsequently for research purposes can be viewed as a form of participant observation (Smith, 2002). Secondly, a review of several other universities' utilisation of their RTO status for staff training was undertaken. Thirdly, interviews were held with internal stakeholders connected with the RTO's operations relating to staff training. Those interviewed were: the RTO's co-ordinator, the Director of the Division of Information Technology, a staff development officer from the Division of Human Resources, and a supervisor in the text processing department of the Learning Materials Centre. These semi-structured interviews (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995) were designed to elicit the reasons for stakeholders' interest in, and engagement with, accredited training. Interviews are generally regarded as being the best way to understand the world view of the respondent and to gather new ideas on a topic (Merriam, 1988: 74). Following completion of the data collection, the findings from each phase of research were written up separately and then a thematic analysis (Stake, 1995) was undertaken to draw out the main issues uncovered during the research.

Findings

Document analysis

Documentation of the development of the RTO within the university revealed little mention of the reasons why the university wished to establish an RTO. However, notes of an informal meeting attended by the Vice Chancellor establish that the Vice Chancellor viewed the accreditation of staff training as the most valuable function of the RTO. An RTO advisory committee meeting soon afterwards set down the major functions of the RTO including the accreditation of staff training. Subsequent Advisory Committee meetings record discussion of the use of the RTO to accredit staff IT training, and associated consultancy work undertaken for the Human Resources Division. This comprised mapping of a staff development course against

the 'Train Small Groups' unit of competency, and mapping of the work of the university's text processing staff against relevant Training Packages. However the minutes of the meetings indicate that at least as much attention was paid to discipline-related RTO activities (ie for use with students) as to staff development activities.

In late 2002 difficulties were encountered relating to the question of 'who pays' for accreditation of staff training. This issue was complicated by the position of HR as a service provider of staff development (although funds did not change hands) to Divisions and Faculties of the university, with a restricted budget. Notes from a teleconference in November involving senior personnel from HR and IT Divisions show that the issue was left unresolved and the RTO's funding status for the future uncertain. Moreover there were some sensitivities about division of labour between the RTO and the HR Division which are apparent in notes from this teleconference and of the RTO Advisory Committee in December 2002. A draft paper was produced outlining the relative roles of HR and the RTO, which was still under discussion in early 2003. In a separate development, a proposal for the use of units of competence in Assessment and Workplace Training for the training of academic staff was greeted with a positive response at a senior management strategic planning meeting. The direction was that this should be directed initially at casual academics of whom it was estimated there were 500 employed. A draft paper developed by the RTO and the university's teaching development section setting out this proposal in more detail was approved at a meeting of Deans and those Directors with academic responsibilities. However notes from the meeting record that the most senior academic present, although supporting the proposal, stated that 'the term competency-based training makes my flesh crawl'.

Contact with other universities

Other universities were contacted to investigate the extent to which they used their RTO for staff training. The National Training Information Service as well as personal contact with VET academics was used to try to identify universities which might be involved. The research process indicated that, even among dual sector institutions such as some Victorian universities, little accreditation of staff development was taking place. At RMIT, for example, the only usage of the RTO for staff was in accrediting staff in the TAFE section of RMIT with the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. Some universities, for example University of New England, used their RTOs as stand-alone commercial providers competing with other private and public RTOs for mainstream business. Others, like Griffith, used their RTOs only for accreditation purposes associated with VET or VET-in-schools degree courses.

The University of Newcastle appeared to be the most advanced user of accredited training. While not an RTO itself, it had a close partnership with a private RTO which did enable some staff development to be accredited. This was confined to a Frontline Management qualification and the unit 'Train Small Groups'. For the latter unit, departments paid for the staff's training but if staff required certification they had to pay this cost themselves. Attendance at the 'Train Small Groups' training was part of the contract for casual tutors, although certification was not compulsory. The University of New South Wales appeared to be proceeding in the same direction but on a smaller scale. Using, in this case, their own RTO, the university offered units from the same Training Packages as did Newcastle to its own staff. However, unlike

Newcastle, there was little take-up of Assessment and Workplace Training units among academic staff, either full-time or casual.

Stakeholder interviews

Interviews were conducted with staff in the Division of Information Technology, the Division of Human Resources, and the RTO. Notwithstanding the general support of accredited training for staff development at senior management level noted above, IT was the only division where this interest has translated into specific requests for accreditation.

The predominance of Distance Education (DE) within the university course structure had made the IT department a significant stakeholder in the area of skill development and recognition. The DE mode encompassed both traditional paper based teaching and learning materials as well as an increasing on-line component. Electronic communication ranged from simple emails to the electronic submission, logging and marking of assignments, student participation in subject-based electronic forums (ie subject 'chat rooms') and fully on-line teaching and learning. The IT Division had responsibility for the production of paper based instructional materials (in its department of materials production and design), as well as the more familiar IT responsibilities of computer and network support. Consequently, IT Division staff could be engaged in a range of functions from basic clerical work through para-professional and professional activities in text editing and instructional design as well as network maintenance and development.

In general the interviews reflected and confirmed the attitudes found in the document analysis section of the paper. Perceptions by stakeholders may be grouped around two general categories. These are, issues to do with perceptions of relevance of the nature and level of skills and knowledge expressed in Training Packages and questions involving administrative structures and practices of the university.

Perceptions of the relevance of accredited training

IT management saw advantages in providing accredited staff development to approximately Certificate II/III levels, particularly in the text editing and clerical/administrative areas, but had reservations about the relevance of accredited packages in para-professional and professional computing, network design and maintenance areas. Staff development was considered important for these latter groups, but management considered that other skill development programs, such as those recognised by the computer industry and directly associated with hardware and software manufacturers and suppliers (such as Microsoft/Novell etc) were more appropriate. A difficulty noted was the rapid and ongoing change in computing, and it was argued that existing accredited programs were either not at an appropriate technical level and/or were unable to keep pace with changes in the industry. Thus this attitude could be industry-specific.

Support for accredited training was however quite strong at supervisor level in the materials production and design section. Here it was noted that job functions were expanding and changing and that Training Packages were generally able to reflect skill needs as applied by staff. It was in fact a recognition of these changing job

functions that had underpinned the skills mapping exercises noted earlier in the paper. This applied both to both to 'technical' skills such as editing, layout and design and also to the increased requirements for on-the-job supervision and training to be found in training qualifications up to Certificate IV level.

Two further advantages of accredited training were noted. These were first, that the provision of accredited and nationally recognised training would allow the university to 'give something back to staff', (a sentiment with which senior management concurred), and second, that the *internal* use of accredited packages would also assist in *external* recruitment. It was stated that the diverse roles undertaken in the course production area had led to job advertisements that were either confusing or had deterred potential applicants who assumed that they did not have the required range of skills. As a result, there had been a number of occasions in which no applications had been received for advertised positions. The use of specific criteria as contained in the accredited packages provided more transparent job statements and allowed potential applicants readily to identify that their previous experience and/or certification met the job requirements. It is worth noting that despite the interest shown by general staff, particularly in obtaining teaching/training credentials, the RTO co-ordinator reported that no academic staff had responded to opportunities so far advertised. Thus, despite the 'blurring' of traditional boundaries between some academic and general staff noted elsewhere (Pickersgill, van Barneveld & Bearfield, 1998) in this study the interviews appeared to identify differences in acceptance between 'academic' (as well as higher-level 'professional' areas) and the technical and applied areas.

Perceptions of organisational and administrative issues

The second general area of comment related to organisational and administrative structures and practices. Again, comments in this area can be grouped under two broad areas. These were first, a recognition that, as the provision of accredited training within the context of staff development and the setting up of a university RTO was new, a clearer definition of roles needed to be developed. The RTO and HR staff members both noted that there was an apparent overlap of roles in providing some areas of staff development and that this was the subject of on-going negotiation. There was however a fairly positive view that accredited training should play a significant role within an overall staff development strategy and that there was no inherent reason why administrative issues would not be resolved.

The second area noted was the issue of who should pay for training. As noted earlier in the paper the staff development budget was limited. One issue raised by interviewees was the extent to which fee-for-service arrangements should be met through internal university transfers, and the extent to which individuals should contribute to staff development activities that resulted in the staff receiving transferable and recognised qualifications. The first point was seen as requiring some policy clarification from senior management, while the second involved some more delicate employee relations issues. One proposal suggested by the RTO officer was that the actual skills training be provided by the university as part of its normal staff development activities (that is to say, non-accredited training but to the level specified in national standards), but that staff pay for accreditation of that training if they wished to receive a formal, externally recognised certificate.

At the time of the research, these issues had not been resolved. However, it is significant that the concept of accredited training (where packages are available at the appropriate level) be incorporated within staff development was, in principle, supported by the stakeholders involved in this research. It was also interesting to note that identified issues and perceptions relating to the wider incorporation of accredited training within university staff development programs appeared to be more closely related to particular university administrative and employee relations strategies than they were to direct issues of knowledge and skill development.

Discussion and conclusion

Gaining acceptance for an innovation involves not only support for an idea but willingness to change structures, attitudes and behaviours to enable the idea to be implemented. In this case study it was clear that staff at all levels of the university agreed that it was a good idea to have the capability of formal accreditation for staff training. There were some clearly articulated notions of the benefits such an innovation would bring; for example, staff motivation, assistance with recruitment, and higher skill levels in areas of strategic importance. However it was not clear the accredited training was considered suitable for all levels or types of staff. For example, because provision and accreditation of academics' training was only at the initial stages of planning it was not really possible to judge whether academics' attitudes to CBT would influence their take-up of accredited training opportunities. The comment by the senior academic manager recorded earlier in the paper suggested that there might well be some resistance to the notion. The acceptance of accredited training could also be hindered by the belief that it was appropriate only for lower-level staff. This attitude emerged clearly only in an interview in the IT Division and without other divisions with which to compare, it is not possible to state that it was not industry-specific.

While accredited training was accepted, at least for non-academic and less senior staff, as a good thing in principle, its implementation was not so straightforward. Changes to structures, attitudes and behaviours needed to be involved in the acceptance process. There appeared to be several factors which made implementation problematic. Firstly the university structure had not been set up to contain an RTO so it did not 'fit' well within present structures. Secondly there were varying degrees of familiarity with the VET system and some senior staff were thus unfamiliar with the processes involved in having staff training accredited. Thirdly (and this finding was inferred not explicitly stated) the amount of time required to add a qualification to the RTO's scope seemed to frustrate stakeholders.

Thus in order for accredited training to be widely accepted and understood several factors needed resolution. The university structure needed to be realigned to accommodate the RTO, and to enable stakeholders and staff to understand the distinction between the RTO and the staff development function of HR. Allied to this, the roles of the various staff members (such as the RTO co-ordinators, staff development officers, department supervisors) needed to be made clearer. In addition the research supported the literature in that the staff development function of the university was found to be relatively underdeveloped; hence the addition of a new notion – accredited training – was all the more problematic. Finally it seemed that more education generally about accredited training opportunities was needed for all

staff so that they understood not only the possibilities it opened up but also the complexities and timeframes associated with its introduction.

Much of the confusion about structures and roles appeared to relate to the fact that the RTO served two major purposes: student-based and staff-based. Hence it could not sit within the HR department as might be the case in some other enterprise RTOs. However it should be noted that in other instances enterprise RTOs do not only serve the staff of their own organisation (for example they might offer commercial courses to external students) and so the structural difficulties outlined in the paper may not be exclusive to universities. Issues of cross-charging and unclear role definition might be common to many enterprise RTOs. The literature on enterprise RTOs is not yet sufficiently well-developed to enable a judgment to be made in this area.

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