

From *Getting clever about completions*: Increasing TAFE NSW qualification completions

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Abstract

Lifting qualification completions is a challenge currently being faced by all education sectors in Australia and internationally. The focus on raising the skill levels of the broader population, addressing skill shortages, and increasing workforce participation, particularly of young people, rely on an increase in vocational education and training (VET) sector qualification completions.

This report provides an overview of current thinking and research findings from the *Increasing TAFE NSW qualification completions* action research project. While the strategies reported on are generally not new ideas, they provide an array of interventions which, when combined, have real potential to improve qualification completions.

An overriding message from the research was that no single factor caused students to “drop out”. Ex-students confirmed that discontinuing their TAFE course was not always a conscious decision, rather they had “drifted off” due to a combination of course, work related and personal factors.

Introduction

The VET sector has committed to national and state targets which focus on the number of students completing qualifications. Improving the rate of completions is key to raising the educational levels of the wider population, alleviating skill shortages and increasing workforce participation and productivity to counter the impact of an ageing population. The Commonwealth and State Governments have implemented National Partnership Agreements to deliver ambitious student completion targets between 2009 and 2020.

Moves towards a more competitive VET sector training market also necessitate a focus by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) on improved qualification completions, as this will become a critical factor in attracting and maintaining student enrolments. The implementation of a Unique Student Identifier (USI) for VET students will further increase the focus on completions as data capture is enhanced and the resultant data analysed.

Improving qualification completions is not only a current focus in the Australian VET sector but it is also a focus in key international contexts. The European VET quality framework, which is based on a set of common indicators for all members, specifically includes measures of qualification completions (CEDEFOP 2009). The United Kingdom (UK) is focussed on the completion of full qualifications. Shreeve (2009) identifies targets set by the UK Treasury as the highest level policy driver for improving qualification completions. These targets are based on increasing the number of people in the UK with certain qualifications up to Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) benchmarks. They are underpinned by advice from the UK Department for Innovation and Skills showing that

statistical increases in individuals' earnings are associated with whole qualifications not just module/unit completions.

In the United States, in 2009, President Obama called for an additional target of five million community college graduates by 2020 as part of the *Achieving the Dream* initiative. This represents an annual increase of 33 per cent on the current completion rates. The aim of the *Achieving the Dream* (ATD) initiative is to help more community college students succeed. It has a special focus on students from minority groups and low-income students. The initiative aims to close the gap for low income and minority group students and to reverse the slide in overall post-secondary achievements compared to other developed countries.

Identifying students' intentions at the time of enrolment and as they progress through their qualification is also critical to determining how many students meet their learning goals. TAFE NSW is participating in a survey being conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) which aims to identify student intentions in 2010-2011 with a view to determine the groups of students for whom a course completion is an appropriate performance indicator.

NSW VET sector completions

Recently published Australian VET sector research by Mark and Karmel estimates the national completion rate for all vocational course enrolments for students who commenced in 2005, at 27.1 per cent. This rate increases to 34.7 per cent for full-time students aged 25 years or older who have no prior vocational qualification. Based on their modelling, the NSW completion rate is higher for both cohorts at 40.7 per cent for all students in all courses, and 49.0 per cent for full-time students aged 25 years or older who have no prior vocational qualification.

The NCVER 2008 national VET completions data for publicly funded programs show that the NSW VET sector had the largest share of national Certificate III and above completions at 32.4 per cent. This figure would be expected as NSW has a high share of these enrolments nationally. The NSW contribution to the 2008 national total for completions is relatively high in Certificate IV (32.4 per cent) and Diploma and above (31.1 per cent).

TAFE NSW had approximately 82 per cent of NSW completions in Certificate III and above qualifications in 2008. TAFE NSW's student qualification completion rates compare favourably to the broader NSW student completion rates and also those of students in other states. However, results are not consistent for all cohorts and course groups.

In 2010, TAFE NSW decided to take a 'good hard look' at its qualification completions.

Literature review

A full review of literature relating to VET sector qualification completions was developed for use by Institute action research teams. This section provides a snapshot of the key themes from the literature, most of which focus on students, their characteristics and their intentions, the features of successful delivery and assessment strategies, and external factors that contribute to students completing.

A critical message is that students usually have more than one reason for not completing, so a multi-faceted approach is needed to improve completions. No single solution will work for every student and no single solution will resolve the problem entirely.

There is a correlation between some student characteristics and completions – socioeconomic status, age and disability can all affect the rate of completion but the correlations are not generally strong. Aboriginality, on the other hand, is strongly correlated with low rates of completion. Balatti et al (2004), identified strategies to support Indigenous students in mainstream VET programs. These include a ‘whole of organisation’ approach to developing staff expertise; a strengthened relationship between the Indigenous training units and the rest of the Institute; stronger collaboration between Institutes; and organisational support to help students to manage attendance and assessment requirements.

Very young students and students who had only completed up to Year 10 are also linked to low completions. They were found most likely to not complete their studies and often discontinued within eight weeks of commencement. Initial contact with the student is critical. Strategies recommended by the research for how training providers could configure their services to improve completions include better segmentation of student cohorts and encouraging them into particular programs suited to their goals and their characteristics.

Polesel, Davies and Teese (2004) recommend close screening of students at enrolment and progressively reviewing student satisfaction during training to customise delivery and provide students with additional assistance. At-risk learners need additional services and support, including language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) and pastoral care to maximise completions.

As part of the *2006 Student Outcomes Survey*, NCVET identified a number of key factors that could impact on completions. Twenty-seven per cent of respondents identified staff attributes and behaviours as areas for improvement, while 25 per cent of respondents identified teaching and learning practice as areas that should be improved. The relationship between the student and teacher is a strong predictor of completion rates. Increasing work placement and improving the currency of training are also identified by students as areas where quality improvements could be made. Further research identifies the availability of recognition and the flexibility of training, particularly the sequencing of training and the timing of assessments, as critical factors impacting on completions.

There is research on how choice and flexibility affects completions. This is a little more complicated, since some studies show that more choice equates to lower completion rates. Conversely, some students’ data suggests offering more choices may improve completions.

Changing economic conditions are a major factor affecting completions. Many students who are enrolled in a particular qualification to get work will discontinue their studies when they get a job. Close monitoring of student progress and identifying risk points and factors, particularly in difficult units of competency can positively impact on student completions. Balancing work and study for tertiary students aged 25 and younger has been shown to be critical for course completion (Polidano and Zakirova, 2011). Vocational education students who combine part time study with full time work are more likely to course complete than part time students enrolled in higher education courses. The type of work performed while studying has a significant bearing on completion with those working in a full time job they would like as a career, more likely to complete their studies.

A distinctive characteristic of the VET sector identified by Mark and Karmel (2010) is that many students wish to learn specific skills and have no intention of completing a full qualification. The current calculation of course completion does not capture legitimate learning activity that is a subset of a course completion, such as skill sets. The national definition of course completion therefore fails to note student or enterprise intent and provider success in meeting that need.

For some students, particularly apprentices and trainees, the major factor affecting completion rates is related to their work environment including wages, conditions and their relationship with their employers (Snell and Hart, 2008). The NCVER Australian vocational education and training statistics: apprentice and trainee destinations 2010 identified the main reasons for not completing an apprenticeship or traineeship included redundancy and changing career. The report states that 26.8 per cent left a trade apprenticeship or traineeship because they lost their job or were made redundant and 28.8 per cent left a non-trade apprenticeship or traineeship because they left their job or changed career. The data highlight the impact of external economic conditions on apprenticeship completions.

Service Skills Australia (2011) found that most of the reasons for non-completion amongst trainees they studied, are work and home/family related and most are 'short term' such as illness or job promotion.

Provision of Pastoral Care in Apprenticeships (Clarke and Lamb, 2009) investigated and identified effective support and pastoral care arrangements for apprentices in the 15-24 year old age group. The report suggests that different types and degrees of pastoral care are required at different stages throughout an apprenticeship. Key elements of pastoral care within the scope of this study included: provision of appropriate information, direct support and/or counselling, mentoring, monitoring and/or visits to students at work, dispute resolution and workplace supervision.

Although RTOs have less direct influence over these work-related factors, they can provide clear, reliable and easily accessible information for students, maintain contact with workplaces and foster communication with all parties involved in the apprentice's training.

The importance of the relationship between the training provider and the employer in apprenticeship completions was highlighted by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2008) who stated that retention is assisted by collaborative partnerships and customised strategies. Similarly, a key component of the Australian Industry Group project on accelerated trade training, Faster, Smarter, Higher, was the collaboration between industry and training providers.

Methodology

The Increasing TAFE NSW qualification completions project was undertaken during 2010. It involved 17 action research teams, from across all ten TAFE NSW Institutes, who investigated specific aspects of qualification completions and identified strategies to address local completions issues. Teams included over 360 TAFE NSW staff, managers and head teachers, full and part time teachers, Adult Basic Education (ABE) support staff, counsellors and Aboriginal support staff. The project began with a project forum where presenters with recognised expertise in improving completions provided input to all project teams.

Institute teams focused on completions in particular qualifications, groups of related qualifications or completions of specific student cohorts. Teams investigated course areas or specific student cohorts where data indicated there was a significantly low level of completions or it was a high risk area. Institute projects covered a range of industry areas, AQF levels and a number had a focus on specific groups of students such as young people or Aboriginal learners.

Institute teams gathered quantitative and qualitative data on the reasons for students' non-completions through a range of methods. These included surveys and interviews with previous and current students; staff focus groups; and interviews with Institute support staff, community representatives and employers. Institutes used data collected through these interviews and surveys to analyse aspects of their course delivery and assessment processes. Actions were identified for trial or implementation during semester two, 2010 and beyond.

Data from Institute project teams was analysed and factors impacting on completions and strategies to address identified factors were identified and clustered into themes.

Findings and discussion

An overriding message from the research was that no single factor caused students to “drop out”. Ex-students confirmed that discontinuing their TAFE course was not always a conscious decision, rather they had “drifted off” due to a combination of course, work related and personal factors.

The research demonstrated that improving completions is the business of everyone in the organisation. Staff involved in providing course information or support, enrolment, delivery and assessment, follow up on students and managing data and reporting all need to be aware of the importance of improving completions and how they can intervene to improve outcomes. Early intervention is key to identifying and resolving difficulties.

Four areas of investigation were identified: pre-enrolment/enrolment strategies; quality delivery and assessment; building partnerships that support students and systems and administration issues. Approaches reported on are not new ideas in themselves, but can be combined effectively to address factors impacting on completions of a particular course or for a particular cohort of students.

Pre-enrolment/enrolment strategies

Students are unlikely to complete a qualification if they are enrolled inappropriately. Students must have access to the full range of information they need to make an informed choice. Many students, particularly young school leavers, tend to select a course without having clear career goals. They often agree to an enrolment to meet mutual obligation or legislative requirements.

‘I kind of threw myself into it – I’d finished high school and didn’t want to do nothing. I really didn’t know what I wanted to do.’

Non-completing TAFE Diploma student

It is also important for staff to evaluate students’ capacity to complete the course, identify those students who may need extra support with literacy and/or numeracy and gauge what

students want to achieve from the course. Several Institute teams trialled a skills audit on enrolment to help determine whether the course and AQF level match students' backgrounds, skills and aspirations. This approach allows teachers to gather a fuller picture of the enrolling students, including their LLN and adult learning skill support needs. It also allows identification of their eligibility for recognition prior to course commencement or to 'fast track' specific units of competency because of opportunities in their workplace.

Institute teams identified that a structured program of learner support (preferably through team teaching with an LLN specialist teacher with knowledge of the vocational course) is a critical factor in supporting students to successfully complete qualifications.

Some students require a set of skills for work, licensing or personal reasons rather than a full qualification. Understanding students' intentions from the outset is critical, as it can allow teaching sections to provide alternative course options, where available, for students who are seeking a discrete skill set. Skill sets may be more appropriate for particular students, but organisations need to be able to count industry recognised skill sets as a legitimate learning "completion."

Quality delivery and assessment

The quality of delivery and assessment, and more specifically, whether the delivery and assessment is appropriate for the particular student, is fundamental to increasing completions. Young school leavers, Aboriginal students, part time students juggling busy workloads and those studying in a flexible mode may require different strategies or structuring of delivery and assessment to give them maximum opportunity to complete their qualifications.

One Institute wide project focused on improving completions for Aboriginal students. Approximately 130 Aboriginal students were surveyed and interviewed, with 123 surveys returned and around 100 staff members participating in forums across the Institute. This provided a 'whole of Institute' picture of strategies that would make a difference. The team also reviewed initiatives that are already working to identify what aspects could be transferred to other programs. The project focus was summarised as:

'TAFE has a major role to play in ensuring our environment is as welcoming as possible and sensitive to the needs of Indigenous people, and to that end we need to start putting the resources towards approaches such as case management, a meaningful orientation week, a culturally appropriate physical environment and close partnerships with community organisations and other local agencies. In many cases, these suggestions cost nothing, or very little, yet go a long way toward increasing the likelihood that an Aboriginal student will be 'staying the course'.'

Project coordinator

Another project team investigating strategies for young people observed that many of their students:

'...were disadvantaged and misunderstood young people, who were coping with significant family and social issues. Many of them were independent by the age of 16, caring for themselves as

best they could, and having to cope with highly complex problems, often without supportive role models to look to for guidance.'

Project coordinator

Successful features implemented include: extended partnerships with external support agencies; modified course delivery hours to better meet students' needs; a facility to assist students with missed work; 'vocational tasters' to help students make an informed choice about vocational electives; allocation of coordination hours for mentoring and one to one sessions with students; provision of a healthy lunch program and cultural awareness training for staff.

Part time students surveyed indicated that while they were happy with the course, their *expectations of study* were an obstacle to course completion. The majority of students were working to support themselves and juggling busy lives. Part time students had less time for study, unless they were very organised learners, and many were unaware at the outset how much work the course would entail.

Differences in rates of completions between full time and part time students enrolled in the same qualification were reported. The Commercial Cookery project found that 53 per cent of the full time cohort completed, compared with 27 per cent for the equivalent part time program. The team compared a class who enrolled full time in January 2009 and completed in December 2009 studying three days per week, and a trade class who commenced study in January 2008 and completed in June 2010 studying one day per week.

Problem units or 'hot spots' are those difficult or lengthy units of competency which students struggle with and which are particularly difficult sections of the course. Several projects focused on problem units in different industry areas and AQF levels. Awareness of these critical points has value, as teachers are alert to the need for increased monitoring of students as they move through the 'problem units'. Analysis and monitoring of roll book data helps identify these critical points.

Some teaching sections have identified ways of restructuring their programs or assessment to help students through these difficult patches in the course. For many trade courses, an initial 'hot spot' is at the beginning of the course. Research by Karmel and Mlotkowski (2010) confirms that when apprentices withdraw in the first three months of a program, the reasons are usually workplace or employer related and when apprentices leave programs in the second or third year it is more likely to be due to dissatisfaction with the training program.

Building partnerships that support students

Building strong partnerships with employers is essential to improving apprenticeship outcomes. Partnerships with local community organisations and agencies can help alleviate external factors impacting on individual students at risk of not completing. Flexibility is needed to address student needs.

An understanding of students' workplace environment and good communication with employers are strategies that can be used to support apprentices in both their first and subsequent years. A team which focused on completions for Automotive apprentices across the Institute, observed that there is no such thing as an homogeneous workplace and the external factors impacting on completions are diverse.

'...reasons given by apprentices for non-completion or withdrawal from study and which are labelled as 'employment related' are by no means clear cut. Most reasons have a breadth and depth of complexity which expose multiple dimensions and significant interrelationships among and between the various categories.'

Project team report

Systems and administration issues

One of the most valuable outcomes for many project teams was an understanding of the willingness of students who had discontinued courses to discuss the reasons with a TAFE staff member in follow up phone calls or surveys. In many instances, these students who had withdrawn had not discussed leaving the course with teachers or other staff prior to leaving. Follow up strategies, implemented as soon as a student's attendance level drops, were found to be a worthwhile intervention. As well as possibly being able to influence students to remain in the course, follow-up feedback from these students and provides a valuable opportunity for a review of the program.

The projects increased participants' awareness of the importance of accurate record-keeping and monitoring of issues which impact on completions, such as students transferring between colleges or Institutes or varying their enrolments. Teams commented on the value of understanding the implications of completion-related statistics.

Most Institute project reports commented on the potential and ongoing advantages of having action research teams to address specific completions issues. Teams provide a mix of expertise to address key educational issues and a vehicle for professional conversations and reflective practice.

A number of Institutes incorporated cross-Institute strategies into their project action plans to be implemented in 2011 and beyond. These include course completions as an area for strategic improvement in Institute or faculty business plans, systematically targeting specific qualifications from faculty areas for intervention with the aim of improving completion rates and promoting sharing of successful strategies across colleges.

Conclusions

With the current emphasis on lifting completion outcomes across the tertiary sector, there is a need for continuing research and investigation into factors impacting on completions and strategies to address areas of low qualification completion for specific student groups and industry sectors.

TAFE NSW is extending this project in 2011 with Institute action research teams focusing specifically on apprenticeships. Teams will work collaboratively with employers and other organisations to improve apprenticeship completions and implement use of the new NSW Training Plan.

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