

Best practice in managing diversity in TAFE distance learning centres

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INTRODUCTION

Reports of the work undertaken by Distance Learning Centres (DLCs) indicate that there are many examples of innovative training practice currently being implemented through TAFE institutes in Victoria. Participants are extremely diverse and come from groups who have been widely recognised as disadvantaged. The project was devised on the basis of anecdotal reports that suggested these people included a high proportion of women, people with limited access to transport (particularly home based parents), rural and isolated people, shift workers who are unable to commit to or attend regular classes, people with physical disabilities, people with psychiatric or learning disabilities, and people who have not gained entry to their preferred course and require entrance through other means.

There are many examples of innovative delivery methods employed by DLCs which have enabled individuals from diverse backgrounds and circumstances to successfully participate in training, attain qualifications and advance to further study or employment through the use of customised and flexible delivery methods. Methods employed are diverse and are structured according to individual needs, circumstances and constraints.

A parallel development has been the implementation of the policy of managing diversity, which encourages and promotes a more accessible and inclusive learning and training system for people with diverse backgrounds. The managing diversity approach seeks to optimise opportunities for all individuals irrespective of gender, culture, age, location, disability or disadvantage to fulfil their education and training goals. The approach is underpinned by a number of principles including valuing diversity, recognising and encouraging the contribution of people with diverse backgrounds to the community, and providing learning and training opportunities which focus on a person's needs as an individual, rather than as a member of a particular equity group.

On the basis of the research involving members of the Open Training Network (OTN), it would appear that the practices of DLCs are good practice examples of managing diversity, and are closely aligned with the key principles and objectives that underpin the managing diversity approach. The link between the concept of managing diversity, and flexible modes of delivery, is the focus on the individual, who is not considered and treated on the basis of their membership of a targeted equity group, but rather on their individual needs and skills. The learning environment is structured to support such individual requirements and enhance skills and abilities. This project has undertaken to document and analyse the work undertaken through Distance Learning Centres, and identify models of practice for the implementation of the managing diversity policy within the vocational education and training sector, which in Victoria is marketed as TAFE.

PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

This project has been funded by the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE), and has been guided by the aims to:

1. Gain a clear overview of the nature and patterns of participation of people enrolled through distance learning methods.
2. Analyse participation against the principles of managing diversity.
3. Identify innovative or 'best practice' examples of flexible delivery to diverse groups.
4. Identify examples of diverse students/individuals who have benefited from distance learning methods.

These aims have been fulfilled by the gathering of both quantitative and qualitative information about the work conducted by members of the OTN through Distance Learning Centres and analysing participation data within the framework of the managing diversity policy.

Initially, a focus group session was conducted with the OTN members for the purpose of identifying the links between the concept of managing diversity and their work in TAFE Distance Learning Centres throughout Victoria. A review of relevant national and international literature was completed to investigate current issues and trends in the provision of distance education in the vocational education and training sector.

Quantitative data were gathered regarding distance learning enrolments and the characteristics of participants from both national and state sources. These sources were the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistics Standard (AVETMISS) and the national, and state of Victoria, TAFE Graduate Destination Survey Report 1998. The quantitative data were analysed through the framework of managing diversity according to gender, membership of other equity groups, special needs, languages, employment status, place of residence, and field of study.

In order to contextualise this quantitative information, and develop an understanding of the practices of Distance Learning Centres that contribute to managing diversity, a number of structured interviews were conducted with a representative sample of DLC staff, who are members of the Open Training Network, from across Victoria. The participating DLCs were chosen so as to represent the diversity of geographical regions and communities within Victoria, and the associated differences in student populations and needs.

MANAGING DIVERSITY

The goal of the managing diversity approach is underpinned by a number of principles including, valuing diversity, access to and effective participation in vocational and further education, an outcomes focus on performance, responsiveness to clients with special needs, reporting on achievement, and managing diversity as a corporate responsibility.

Managing diversity builds on equity programs and policies that have been informed by notions of social justice, acknowledging that all individuals, irrespective of their background, are entitled to participate fully in the community. Whilst this remains relevant, more recent program developments are also underpinned by economic arguments that inequality of treatment results in under-utilisation of human resources. This contributes to associated costs for governments and restricts economic growth. (ANTA 1996, 3) Equity is perceived to be necessary for both the full development of individual potential, as well as the achievement of economic success. This reasoning is indicative of the outcomes focussed nature of the policy, which promotes that by providing opportunities, and thus creating an equitable environment, providers in the VET sector are proactively working towards the goal of full participation in, and contribution by, all community members to the economy of the state of Victoria.

In the context of vocational education and training, the objectives of the managing diversity approach are met by programs and services that "value and respond to the diversity of the community population, provide accessible and flexible training programs and services, offer choice to participants, respond to students with special needs, and report on achievements". (Barwon South Western Regional Council of ACFE 1998, 6)

Background to Managing Diversity Approaches

Management approaches have changed significantly during this century as a result of the changing roles of industry, technology and the market with the creation of different workplace and learning environments, characterised by changes in the nature of work, knowledge/skills acquisition and the demographic profile of workers. The previously predominant management styles of Fordism and Post-Fordism created a workplace culture which required individuals with diverse backgrounds to assimilate into the dominant culture of the work/study environment that they entered, and provided limited opportunities for such individuals to actively participate in "decision-making, learning or innovation". (Bean 1996-97, 23)

Affirmative Action and Negotiated Targets Strategies are shorter term strategies implemented to enable the recruitment of individuals who identify as members of equity groups in the community, and to encourage and increase their representation at, and participation in, various levels of management in organisations. In contrast, managing diversity is a long term management strategy which aims to change the workplace environment and culture to enable all individuals to participate and reach their full potential. Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity strategies may remain relevant as

a part of the larger management strategy in such an environment to initially recruit individuals with diverse backgrounds into the particular workplace, employment classification/field or industry sector. The principles of managing diversity work towards "changing the system and modifying the core culture" to create an environment which "enables all ... without disadvantaging anyone". (Thomas 1991, 26, 76)

Managing diversity does not provide a prescriptive set of solutions for creating an enabling environment, but rather requires an organisation to evaluate their organisational culture and environment, and to plan and implement relevant approaches which promote the underlying principles of productive diversity accordingly. The challenges presented by such an approach to an organisation are to maintain a long term commitment to the cultural change process, and to achieve a shift in organisational systems and individual mindsets. The aim is to create an inclusive environment which provides opportunities to all participants to make unique contributions to the company, and to strive to reach their full potential.

Implementing a managing diversity strategy in an organisation entails the development, use and availability of a diverse range of communication strategies and practices, harnessing the positive power of, and opportunities created by, new technologies, and implementing planning processes which are mindful of "the values and expectations of the full range of communities serviced." (Cope & Kalantzis 1997, 192) In undertaking such projects, organisations need to view their products from their clients' perspective, and as such, evaluate how their products meet the needs of diverse members of the community on a regional, national and international scale. The results of successfully implementing a productive diversity approach include increased and sustainable economic competitiveness of the organisation's people and products in an increasingly globalised marketplace.

In the context of organisations that provide education and training, managing diversity recognises that an institution's "strength lies in the unique diversity of ... (the) student body- the breadth and flexibility of the learning experience". (Cope & Kalantzis 1997, 139) Learning becomes a broadening experience when an individual's unique knowledge and experiences of the world are recognised and valued, and learning programs implemented to build upon and extend such skills and knowledge. (Cope & Kalantzis 1997, 273)

Proponents of managing diversity note that this approach benefits all participants in the workplace or study environment, not just those individuals who identify as members of minority groups. Managing diversity strategies aim to create an environment in which all participants are given the opportunity and means to reach their full potential, and as such contribute to the creation and maintenance of an internationally competitive organisation comprising diverse members. In the context of education, both course content and approaches to teaching and learning need to be evaluated and altered "to encourage analysis and description of different ways of thinking, learning and doing". (Cope & Kalantzis 1997, 139) The result is a more flexible learning environment which benefits all participants in the sector.

The principles of managing diversity which address the issues of access to, and effective participation in, education and training involve the consideration of the potential customer as well as the existing customer. In the context of the education and training sector, this involves the "identification of potential customers who may be excluded from courses/services as a result of marketing, timetabling, selection and support practices." (NMIT 1998, 6)

FLEXIBLE DELIVERY

During the 1990s flexible delivery has been a priority in policy and planning, with the ANTA 1998 Flexible Delivery Action Plan recognising the national importance of flexible delivery and learning, which meets the demand for flexibility and choice in training and learning options for Australians. Flexible delivery means that a variety of learning strategies are used in a number of different learning environments, in order to meet the needs of individuals' learning styles, interests and training needs. The education and training provider overcomes restrictive factors of time, place and personal limitations, to provide education in the most suitable way and location for the individual learner. (Johnson 1994, 14)

The intention of flexible delivery is the provision of access to learning for all individuals irrespective of "race, handicap, ability, domicile, previous experience, present occupational situation and preference for learning styles." (Misko 1994, 3) It is this characteristic of adaptability to individual needs that

presents flexible delivery as a strategy which encourages the participation of persons identified in the managing diversity Policy. A number of terms are used to describe flexible delivery in the VET market, including off-campus studies, open learning, self paced learning, fleximode or multimode delivery, and distance education. As this project analyses the practices of distance learning centres, the literature reviewed focuses on the use of flexible delivery in the context of the off-campus mode of delivery of course materials.

In accordance with the competency based approach of TAFE a number of strategies provide learners with flexibility in entrance to, and exit from, programs at different stages in accordance with their educational needs, learning style and other individual-specific factors. Further, enrolment practices recognise prior learning (RPL), and assessment on demand means that the skills and knowledge acquired during the course of study are examined at a stage when the learner is ready.

For a provider to successfully implement and utilise flexible delivery methods to increase opportunities for access to, and participation in, education and training programs, regard must be given to the appropriateness of, and interaction between, a number of factors. Previous studies have identified the needs of learners using flexible delivery mode and classified such as advice, access, communication, and administrative needs. Due to length restrictions of this paper these categories are not further discussed at this point, but are used in the best practice model outlined below. Factors for consideration include the interrelation of course content, delivery and support strategies (including the use of technology), educational settings, modes of assessment, choice of instructor and administrative practices. Both course design/materials and student support systems must be of high quality to ensure a successful approach to flexible delivery, including adequate funding of social justice initiatives and responsibilities. (NCVER 1995, 38)

In contrast to a rigid educational system, the learner-centred philosophy and various modes of study, characteristic of flexible delivery offer students and potential students access to a variety of opportunities in vocational education and training. "The increased options that ... flexible delivery provide(s), enable(s) students to find an option that will meet their particular needs, learning style and lifestyle," and as illustrated above provides increased opportunities and choices for people from diverse backgrounds within the community, including people with a disability, indigenous Australians, rural and isolated people, women and individuals with a non-English speaking background. (Kearns 1997, 1)

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of quantitative data revealed a number of limitations in using such information to accurately identify the characteristics of the distance education student population. The data collected for the purposes of AVETMISS and other sources, may be unreliable with respect to distance education participation and the characteristics of students enrolled in off-campus mode for three major reasons. Firstly, the data collected regarding student characteristics is based on self-declaration by the student on enrolment forms. It is widely accepted that students may accurately denote the characteristics relevant to their status, actively choose to not to declare and to retain anonymity, or may ignore this section on the enrolment forms. This element of choice introduces a large degree of variability into the collection process and results in data which does not accurately represent the characteristics of the student population.

Secondly, the current AVETMISS data collection model makes it difficult to accurately report the number of off-campus students as there are four possible codes that could be used by institutes, as outlined below, which creates confusion in identifying students studying in off-campus modes and the nature of their study participation in this mode. Further, this lack of clarity also fails to permit accurate identification of the student services needs of off-campus participants.

Delivery Type/Identifier

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|----|--|
| 01 | Campus based (both self paced and lockstep) |
| 02 | On-line and remote access (including correspondence) |
| 03 | Employment based (eg industrial/work experience, field placement, fully on-the-job training) |
| 5. | Other (including mixes of the above) |

The other major problem for data collection relates to the current funding model, where modules undertaken in distance education mode are funded at a rate significantly lower than those studied in on-campus mode. There is a perception that Institutes will use every legitimate avenue to obtain the higher rate of funding for module delivery. Many subjects are offered in multiple modes, that is, any combination of on-campus and off-campus mode delivery strategies. If a module features an element of on-campus delivery it will be funded, and identified, at the higher on-campus delivery rate, irrespective of the off-campus delivery elements also required by the subject. These courses may well be administered to a large degree by the staff in distance learning centres who service the off-campus mode elements of delivery. Thus the data will reveal fewer numbers of students using off-campus mode than there are in reality.

AVETMISS

In terms of the representation of equity groups in the distance education student population, 59% are women, 15.5% are unemployed, 11.9% are from a Non-English Speaking Background, 3% are disabled, and 0.3% identify as an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander. The data doesn't permit analysis of student membership of more than one equity group.

The percentage of total student population that study in distance education mode is highest in the Barwon region (7%), and the Loddon Campaspe region (4.68%).

TAFE Graduate Destination Survey

In Victoria, 4.7% of graduates did not attend formal classes whilst studying at TAFE. This compares to the national rate of 4%. In Victoria, 7.8% of graduates who undertook further study at a TAFE after completing their first qualification, enrolled in off-campus mode. At the national level 10.2% of graduates undertook further study using off-campus mode.

SUMMARY OF DLC BEST PRACTICE

Outlined below is a summary of the DLCs policy and practices which provide examples of best practice in managing diversity.

Client Needs

The DLCs enable a diverse range of clients to undertake vocational education and training using distance learning mode by providing administrative and support services which meet student needs that are categorised as follows:

1. *Advice* — regarding course selection, administrative procedures, DLC and Institute services, ongoing academic and non-academic issues;
2. *Access* — to Institute services, course curriculum and materials, academic advice, appropriate assessment, recognition of prior learning processes, and technology;
3. *Communication* — between students, DLC staff, tutors and other Institute services;
4. *Administrative* — requirements of the DLC, specific courses and Institute departments, including enrolment, assignment processing, exam completion.

Technology

DLCs provide access to relevant technology for students through a number of strategies including the establishment of regional vocational training centres in isolated communities, the use of Institute library and information technology, computer loan programs, and offering practical courses in skills development.

Whilst there is an increased usage of educational technology in the VET sector, a significant majority of students using the DLCs studied in this project do not use relevant technology to obtain course materials or to communicate with DLC staff, and further, do not seek to do so. The reason for such limited uptake in use of technology relates to issues of access, including cost and physical isolation, and skills/confidence levels in using the technology. Thus with technologically based study options widely available, DLC clients choose to study using predominantly paper-based course materials. The academic, administrative and support services provided by DLC staff provide choice and flexibility

which enables students to undertake vocational education and training appropriate to their individual needs.

Feedback

DLCs gather feedback regarding the centre's provision of services to meet client needs through formal surveys and informal gathering of feedback by telephone conversations and correspondence with students. The challenge for DLC staff is to distribute formal surveys in such a way as to obtain the highest possible response rate from students. They have developed innovative practices such as including surveys with compulsory module materials and exercises, and by frequent communication with students to determine their levels of satisfaction.

The DLC staff use information regarding services provided by students to continuously improve service delivery and address individual client needs.

Pathways

DLC staff provide individualised advice and counselling to clients regarding the recognition of prior learning, course selection, subject enrolment, course progress, transfer between courses, further education, training and employment opportunities, and referral to appropriate Institute resources, for example, careers counselling or learning support units.

Management and Promotion of DLCs

The value of the services provided by DLCs is promoted by staff in a number of ways including, maintaining a positive environment in the DLC, promoting DLC practices and policies through established organisational reporting mechanisms within the Institute, and with other entities and networks in the VET sector, and regularly interacting with DLC staff from other Institutes.

SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT FINDINGS

The practices and policies of the DLCs evaluated in this project are examples of best practice in addressing the needs of individual students with diverse backgrounds and in promoting cultural change and encouraging the management of issues of, and opportunities for diversity. These best practices are summarised as follows:

1. Policies, implementation plans and actual provision of student service delivery to diverse students
2. Processes for identifying client groups for whom these services are provided
3. Clearly defined contacts for service and course provision for students
4. Staff and resources allocated to coordinate an integrated distance learning and support service delivery
5. Easy access for distance learning students to receive up to date course and career information
6. Provision of comprehensive induction into courses and information which familiarises distance education students with all aspects and services available from the Institute/campus
7. Established procedures for access to essential equipment
8. Undertakes responsibility for communication between TAFE provider and student and between students, for example, by newsletters and student network support
9. Students are given opportunities to evaluate programs and student service delivery through formal and informal feedback mechanisms
10. Client feedback information is used to continually improve DLC policy and practices in student service delivery.

The project findings reinforce that students who enrol in vocational education and training courses by distance learning mode have a variety of vocational and non-vocational reasons for study. Whilst contributing significantly to the individual's chances of obtaining employment after course completion, the study experience also significantly contributes to increased self esteem and empowers students to take control of many aspects of their lives and encourages life-long learning.

The project revealed that quite often, students' needs are not adequately identified on enrolment forms for a number of reasons. By taking the time to consult with the student on an individual basis, DLC staff gather information regarding individual study needs, abilities and expectations. Knowledge

of these needs, and the creation of a staff-student relationship, prior to module enrolment greatly assists centre staff in providing appropriate services for the duration of module enrolment, and contributes greatly to a positive study experience for the individual client.

Participation in the Open Training Network (OTN) was identified as a valuable source of professional development and support for DLC staff. OTN activities provide opportunities to share information regarding best practices in DLC management and student service provision, plan for future challenges, and promote the achievements and needs of DLC and staff to other individuals and organisations in the vocational education and training sector.

In light of the diversity of individual needs addressed by DLCs, and the changing environment of the vocational education and training market and distance education provision, DLC staff expressed the desire to undertake professional development training in order to develop skills in change management and other relevant fields, and to assist in the development and implementation of succession planning strategies.

Many DLC staff noted the need for DLCs to establish closer links with industry and industry training boards, in the future, in order to continue delivering relevant programs which are cognisant of the training needs of employers and students, in the context of their particular region of Victoria.

Whilst the increasing relevance of technology is acknowledged, the project reveals issues relating to access and skills in using such technologies and their differential impact for students and potential students in metropolitan and regional communities. DLCs offer flexibility and real choices for individuals seeking to undertake vocational education and training in distance education mode, by providing appropriate academic, administrative and advisory support which focuses on the individual needs of the clients.

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