

Measuring long-term impacts of short-term projects

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INTRODUCTION

Framing the Future is an ANTA national staff development initiative which has been operating since 1997. During that time, over 320 project teams have been funded, with over 13,000 participants from all parts of the VET sector and from all States/Territories. There has been a huge amount of activity, but can any lasting and long-term impacts be measured?

This paper will outline the reason for and the process used in a long-term impact study of Framing the Future, undertaken by John Mitchell, from John Mitchell & Associates. The process of identifying and assessing the long-term impacts of staff development activities will be discussed. The challenge of identifying long-term impacts and isolating impacts, which can be attributed to particular initiatives, will also be raised. The paper will explore lessons learnt during this process.

NOTE: The reader is encouraged to read Mitchell, J (2000) *Re-framing the Future: A Report on the Long-term Impacts of Framing the Future* Australian National Training Authority for more information, as this paper can provide an introduction and an overview only.

SETTING THE SCENE

Workbased learning projects are difficult to describe as a homogeneous group. Each is based around the identification of a real organisational issue or problem. Typically there would be between five and 25 participants in these project teams with a facilitator to guide the process. The group sees the 'problem' as theirs to solve. They develop an action plan, which includes the identification of the learning required and the resources needed to assist. Participants can measure their learning in terms of the initial action plan.

Projects are focused and take on manageable bodies of work, which can be completed within 4 - 6 months. Project teams are encouraged to take a 'one bite at a time' approach to their identified problem, to structure their activities and experience a sense of completion. Most project teams find that the completion of one project usually means that other issues have been identified for further work.

SHORT-TERM MEASURES

Framing the Future project teams are required to evaluate their projects in terms of the participants' learning, the completion of the action plan and the benefits for their organisation. There is a need to establish readily available and useful processes, resources and imperatives within these short-term projects so that evidence can be gathered to satisfy the funding agencies and organisations' needs. This evidence must be gathered from inception, and not seen as something that can be done on completion.

This short-term evaluation can be quite straight forward. A before and after questionnaire provides a fairly reliable measure of individual's learning through the project. Anecdotal evidence is provided of the before and after comments made by participants, and some may even keep learning journals throughout the project.

To assist project teams undertake this evaluation, Evaluating Workbased Learning - a model was written for Framing the Future projects by Laurie Field (1999b). The booklet is designed to assist individual project teams to develop evaluation methods and use the experience as a learning opportunity rather than just compliance.

'Sometimes it's hard to put on paper something you can't measure in terms of a performance indicator. But you know there's been a change inside. How do you measure that your staff feel more valued?' [A Framing the Future Project Team Manager.]

Intuition used by the project leaders and managers needs to be taken into consideration also when measuring the effectiveness of short-term projects.

EVALUATIONS CONDUCTED TO DATE

During 1997 and 1998, independent evaluations of Framing the Future have been undertaken by Field and Falk. Both these evaluators spoke of the need to use non traditional methods to measure the value of the workbased learning project teams. Both have alluded to the fact that we tend to resort to the traditional methods as these are both understood by the funding bodies, and are known by the participants. Counting numbers of people involved and numbers of dollars expended is not very helpful in measuring the real value of a workbased learning project.

Narrative and qualitative evidence was gathered from the project participants and has been documented by the evaluations conducted during 1997 and 1998. Wegner, E and Snyder, W (2000) speak of the best way of assessing the value of these loosely configured project teams.

"The best way for an executive to assess the value of a community of practice is by listening to members' stories which can clarify the complex relationships among activities, knowledge, and performance."

Stories have been written about many of the projects and their work. This must be a systematic effort, capturing the diversity and range of different projects - the successful and the not so successful. The publishing and circulation of these stories can assist in spreading the impact of these short-term projects. Knapsy (1999).

THE NEED FOR A LONG-TERM IMPACT STUDY

Often the real value and effectiveness of these short-term projects is delayed and only recognised by the organisation after the work of the projects has been completed. The need to put in place a long-term impact study was first identified by the funding body ANTA early in 1999. At that time over 140 workbased learning projects had been completed. This provided a sizeable cohort for the study.

The long-term impact study brief was developed in consultation with the funding body ANTA. It was anticipated that the impacts of Framing the Future would be evident at three levels

- the level of individuals (e.g. individual managers; employees; TAFE teachers),
- the level of particular groups (e.g. teaching faculty; particular workplaces; specific institutes)
- the level of whole subsections of the VET system (e.g. follow-on initiatives by particular industry associations; VET Institutes in a particular region; Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) perceptions of how to approach staff development; other associated ANTA initiatives such as LearnScope).

While intuitively most of those directly involved in Framing the Future projects could say that the short-term projects were having an impact more widely, there was a need to substantiate this thinking. Measuring the long-term impact of any staff development activity has never been easy, and using the advice of previous evaluators, a fresh look at how this could be done was required.

John Mitchell of John Mitchell and Associates was appointed to conduct this long-term impact study during the period October 1999 - March 2000.

THE METHODOLOGY

Before commencing the long-term study, the evaluator conducted a brief literature review covering two specific topics:

1. the Vocational Educational and Training context for Framing the Future in 1997- 1999, particularly in terms of the staff development requirements for the implementation of the National Training Framework;
2. methodologies for long-term impacts studies of staff development programs, assessing impacts for individuals, groups and subsections of the VET sector.

In terms of the first topic, the evaluator completed an analysis of all existing Framing the Future evaluation data. The decision was made to build on the findings generated through previous evaluations and to start the long-term impacts study where these had concluded. In terms of the second topic, the brief literature review on evaluating staff development programs involved the examination of four models. Mitchell (2000) Appendix 3: in summary notes:

'The review began with an analysis of a basic model (Bramley, 1996) for assessing the impact of training on an individual. Some concerns about the limitations of this model were expressed.

Secondly, the review focused on a model (Bramley, 1996) for assessing the impact of staff development on a group or organisation. The model took into account a range of complex factors, such as the levels of effectiveness to be measured, the behaviours necessary to achieve these levels and the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to support these behaviours.

Thirdly, the literature review involved a consideration of a stakeholder model (Mabey et al, 1998), that was a reminder that Framing the Future is but one of a number of internal and external factors that might change behaviours and affect organisational performance.

Finally, the literature review provided a four-stage model of evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 1959), which pointed beyond changes in behaviour to the results from a program, as an indication of where the focus needs to be, in relation to assessing the impacts of Framing the Future on sub-sections of VET. The theories underpinning the above four models influenced the field research for this study of Framing the Future.'

These conceptual models were used by the evaluator to form the basis of the research methodology. The evaluator developed instruments designed to:

- *measure the factors* affecting achievement of objectives;
- *establish cause-effect* interpretations as to whether the outcomes were caused by the program or by external factors
- identify whether there are *unanticipated outcomes* which are contributing to the achievement of objectives or impacting negatively on clients.

One of these instruments was an extensive survey form developed by the evaluator and distributed to project managers of Framing the Future projects conducted during 1997 and 1998.

Mitchell (2000) Chapter 2

"A total of 51 different project managers of Framing the Future projects responded to the survey, from a total of 108 project managers involved in the Program in 1997-98 (a response rate of 47%. The 51 project managers in many cases managed more than one of the projects undertaken in those first two years of Framing the Future, so around 60% of the projects in 1997-98 are represented in the survey responses: a very satisfactory return rate."

The survey form comprised three Sections:

- Section A a true/false response to a range of questions on the types of long-term impacts which were evident
- Section B a seven point Likert Scale to measure the factors which influenced the impacts
- Section C ten open-ended questions, some deliberately designed to validate previous survey responses.

The responses to this survey form were analysed in terms of long-term impacts on individuals, organisations and sub-sections. The recurring long-term impacts were in the areas of:

- implementation of the National Training Framework in particular Training Packages
- the development of new collaborative arrangements and partnerships between providers and industry/enterprise
- ongoing staff development

In addition to the survey, the evaluator interviewed 41 stakeholders of the Framing the Future initiative. People from the funding body, ANTA, from the Framing the Future National Reference

Group and State/Territory contact officers along with ITAB, industry and VET system staff who were involved are listed in Appendix 5 of the report.

In order to be thorough in his approach to this long-term study, the evaluator used another set of lenses to look at long-term impacts. Mitchell (2000) Chapter 6 outlines the measurement of long-term impacts of Framing the Future using this set of lenses.

- Sequence of impacts — did the impacts occur in a sequential manner?
- Spirals of impacts — did the impacts become increasingly more important over time?
- Hierarchy of impacts — are their higher level and lower level impacts?
- Suitability of impacts — are the impacts appropriate and aligned with the program objectives?

The variety of approaches to this study provides the reader with confidence that the findings have been tested and validated. The mixture of qualitative and quantitative data collected, analysed and presented also satisfies a range of reader preferences. The quotes embedded throughout the study add a human dimension to the findings.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Mitchell's (2000) Executive Summary notes 'Some major findings from the study include the following points:

- the long-term impacts of Framing the Future projects regularly go beyond the individual developing new skills and knowledge, to improvements in both work performance and organisational effectiveness.
- Framing the Future projects often result in the development of new forms of collaborative networks between industry and RTOs and sometimes across whole industries and States and Territories.
- a number of vocational training providers who are undergoing organisational change to meet the vocational training needs of industry are using the Framing the Future model of staff development.
- the Framing the Future program has progressively become an agent of systemic change, for instance by affecting the way staff development is conducted across a State/Territory or a national industry.'

Long-term impacts of these short-term workbased learning projects cannot be seen in isolation. In analysing the long-term impacts, the evaluator took into account the internal and external influences which work together to optimise the benefits of the projects. The organisational context and culture in which the projects are being conducted influence the likelihood of follow up work being successful. Short-term projects have the potential to be catalytic by nature and the seeds sown in organisations must be able to thrive in an appropriate culture for long-term impacts to be realised.

LESSONS LEARNT

During the course of this long-term impact study, the Framing the Future management team has learnt the following lessons. If short-term staff development projects are to have a long-term impact they need to have:

- clearly defined directions which are linked to the organisation's strategic plans and policy
- real management/organisational support and commitment for the work of the project, that extends beyond the term of the project
- project processes and support which facilitate the achievement of project goals
- clear understanding by the participants that there is relevance and reason for them to be involved - real work, real imperative and value to the individual
- data collected from the beginning, especially the anecdotes and stories

A constant theme of the Mitchell (2000) report is that positive, long-term impacts are more likely to occur when the funded organisation takes responsibility for providing ongoing staff development, for consolidating the new networks developed with other stakeholders during the project, and for providing continuing infrastructure support. Mitchell (2000) also argues that for optimum long term impacts to be realised, there is a role for the national project management team to continue to provide a range of information-based services to the members of previously funded project teams.

Long-term impacts of short-term project can be measured. By building on evaluations already conducted, by basing measuring instruments on appropriate models and by using a new set of lenses, the evaluator has presented not only a impact study for individuals, organisations and sub-systems, but has provided advice on how impacts could be increased in the future.

References

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