Improving qualification outcomes – successful socially inclusive teaching and learning strategies

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Abstract

The aim of this project was to research and document how inclusive teaching and learning strategies may contribute to improving qualification completions for social inclusion target groups within South Western Sydney Institute, and highlight case studies of faculty specific strategies that contribute to improved qualification outcomes.

The scope included equity cohorts as well as other socially disadvantaged client groups. The focus included groups of students in customised or targeted programs, as well as a sample of individual students who are supported in mainstream programs.

The approach taken in this research study was that the cohorts that "stayed together as a group" would offer the best opportunity to correlate specific teaching and learning strategies with completion outcomes. In studying groups of students, particularly those where the group achieved successful completion outcomes, the project aimed to minimise the influence of individual factors on student outcomes.

One hundred and ten cohort groups were identified as part of the first phase of data collection. A sample were invited to complete a survey instrument. Surveys were competed for 23 cohorts (groups) and 13 cohorts (individuals) and these cohorts were then interviewed to document specific teaching and learning strategies

In "tagging" an identified group in this way the project team was then able to proceed to:
- Track individual and group completion and articulation outcomes
- Identify quantitative and qualitative individual and group profile characteristics , and
- Document the teaching and learning practices i.e. the key elements of the student TAFE experience which was common to the cohort as part of a customised program of delivery.

The project has resulted in a research report, highlighting specific case studies and providing recommendations about socially inclusive teaching and learning strategies.

Introduction

This project was funded through the Institute 2010 Bright Ideas program and looked at several samples of customised programs delivered in Semester 1 2009 which were targeted for social inclusion cohorts.

The project brief included a broad definition of social inclusion target groups, including:

- Students identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- Students identifying as having a disability
- Refugees, overseas skilled migrants and students from a non English speaking and/or culturally or linguistically diverse background
- Students in juvenile justice and correctional facilities
- Students in youth programs
- Other targeted programs for disadvantaged or marginalised groups

The research objective was to highlight the most successful teaching and learning strategies together with recommendations for further evaluation of these snapshots of best practice in 2011

Literature Review

The literature review, in particular, Grant (2002), Bellati (2004), Callan (2005), and Mark and Karmel (2010), highlighted the complexity of measuring completion outcomes in the VET sector, particularly for equity cohorts, due to the number of individual variables impacting on completion outcomes. The difficulty of determining a cause-effect relationship between teaching and learning strategies and completion outcomes was also evident in the literature. Reasons for non-completion were highlighted as students leaving to gain employment, exiting after achieving skills sets, and obtaining entry into another course in the research conducted by Grant (2002), therefore reinforcing the need to recognise the "legitimacy of other end-points of training" (page 101).

The project targeted the analysis of available literature to the teaching and learning strategies that can be addressed as part of the enacted curriculum in terms of:

- actual learning activities that take place in the classroom,
- local decisions about how a program is delivered,
- resources ,and
- assessment strategies that complement the delivery model.

Whilst the initial literature review looked at specific strategies in relation to disability, Aboriginal, refugee, and second chance learners in the VET Sector, it soon became evident that many of the inclusive strategies were part of a universal design process of putting the student at the centre of the learning cycle, with variations where equity cohorts require specific awareness, reasonable adjustment, and cross cultural communication strategies to address disadvantage.

Pre-course planning and comprehensive pre-course information, including assessment advice, was strongly argued by Moy (1990) and Miralles-Lombardo et al (2008).

Screening and selection processes to assess students' capability prior to or at enrolment was identified as key factors by Polesel (2004) and Shreeve (2009).

The flexibility of program design, assessment strategy and delivery was highlighted in most of the literature reviewed in this study and across each of the social inclusion areas – for example Moy (1990), Grant (2002), and Balatti (2004) in the context of Indigenous completion rates, by Miralles-Lombardo (2008) in relation to refugees, by Mitchell (2009) in relation to disengaged apprentices, and by North (2010) as a key feature for improving inclusive practices in VET. Universal Design principles were highlighted by North (2010) and by Vakas (2010) as critical to be embedded at initial planning and resource development stage to ensure equitable access for students, particularly those with disabilities.

The need to assist students become effective and independent learners was highlighted by Cotton (2010) in the context of students with learning difficulties. The quality of teachers and the ability to integrate vocational teaching and foundation skills was highlighted by studies in other social inclusion contexts by Balatti (2004) and Mitchell (2009).

Balatti (2004) explained the importance of appropriate learning spaces for Indigenous students, indicating that "offsite collaborative modes of delivery" (page 23) are effective for engaging indigenous people. The importance of culturally appropriate learning spaces was also highlighted by Miralles-Lombardo (2008) for refugees as an important transition strategy to "increase confidence and English language skills" (page 43). The learning environment needs to engage learners and be a "positive, supportive learning environment for all students" and one that "sees people as equals, but as individuals" TAFE NSW(1997) page 30, written in relation to students with a disability but echoing the literature for all social inclusion target groups.

Support strategies were acknowledged as a key success factor. A range of support mechanisms were identified: integrated language, literacy and numeracy support rather than "add – on" services; additional pastoral care and support Oliff (2010), and promoting sources of support Mitchell (2009) and TAFE NSW SWSI (2007).

Collaborative partnerships and integrated support strategies were identified by Moy (1990), Balatti (2004), and North (2010). These sentiments were also echoed by Miralles-Lombardo (2008) in this study of the role of multicultural organisations in Australia, and also by Oliff (2010) in relation to community partnerships to create "wrap around service provision" (page 6) particularly at key transition points. North (2010) also found that "…the more highly disadvantaged the learner, the larger number of partnerships that are required to provide the support that leads to a positive learner environment" (page 21).

During the final stages of this project, TAFE NSW Strategy (2010) produced a report on the findings of the Increasing Qualifications Project highlighting four key themes that were common to all of the TAFE NSW projects encompassed in that research study:
1. Pre-enrolment/enrolment strategies
2. Meeting the needs of individual students
3. Building partnerships that support students

4. Systems and administration issues

This report recommended strategies to manage competing tensions to achieve Institute and customer needs. These tensions refer to the conflicting priorities that program designers face to achieve appropriate enrolments, completions, and provision of learner support – balancing performance targets, delivery constraints, and customer service priorities, particularly for "at risk students" who require holistic support strategies.

Research method

The action research methodology provided a conventional research framework for the project, commencing with a research question then moving from a literature review to design both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments**.**

The key research question at the centre of the project was: ***How do teaching and learning strategies contribute to improved qualification completions for social inclusion target groups (equity cohorts)?***

In order to establish correlations between specific teaching and learning strategies and completion outcomes, the project focused on groups of students who participated in customised programs in Semester 1 2009.

The first phase of the project involved consultation with faculties and the Social Inclusion Unit to identify two project samples:
- customised programs for social inclusion target groups, and
- customised programs for individual students supported in mainstream programs

The second and third phases of the project used data collection instruments to capture details of the teaching and learning strategies of a smaller sample. In Phase 2 a survey was completed by program designers, and the interviews that formed part of Phase 3 confirmed the quantitative and qualitative information with program designers, coordinators, teachers and key support staff.

Phase 1 Data Collection

As part of the Phase 1 data collection for this project, Faculties nominated one hundred and ten targeted programs for Semester 1 2009 as outlined in Table 1 below:

Table 1   Phase1: Targeted programs by main target group and AQF level

Target Group	DIP	CIV	CIII	CII	CI	SOA	OTS	Number of Programs
Disability	0	0	0	5	4	0	1	10
Indigenous	0	1	5	5	1	5	3	20
NESB	0	3	8	6	0	9	0	26
Women	0	0	1	2	3	5	0	11
Youth	0	0	1	4	6	10	2	23
Social Disadvantage	0	0	0	3	1	13	3	20
Totals	NIL	4	15	25	15	42	9	110
Percentage of Total Sample by AQF Level	**0%**	**3.6%**	**13.6%**	**22.7%**	**13.6%**	**38.1%**	**8.1%**	**100%**

When this data was cross checked with the full 2009 Institute enrolment data set, 1394 individual students were enrolled in 2009, a lower figure than advised by faculties suggesting that some of the programs advised by faculties were not delivered in 2009. The 2009 enrolment data shows that these 1394 students were enrolled across 2651 courses, 487 of which were Learner support courses. If the learner Support programs are removed, there are 2164 courses for this total student cohort, reflecting 75% of student enrolments in Certificate II, Certificate 1 or Statement of Attainment programs.

Phase 2 and 3: Customised Programs for groups

36 programs were selected to participate in the survey phase to ensure programs from all faculties, target groups and colleges were included, however, only 23 responses were received.

The interview process highlighted that some groups had multiple disadvantage, one example being the Deadly Art Program with Aboriginal students with mental health disability, and others addressed multiple categories such as NESB Youth or NESB Women. The categories of target groups used in Table 2 reflect the main category identified by survey respondents to best describe the main cohort for the targeted program.

Table 2   Phases 2 and 3: Customised programs for groups by main target group

Target Group	DIP	CIV	CIII	CII	CI	SOA	TS	Number of Programs
Disability	0	0	0	3	2	0	1	6
Indigenous	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
NESB	0	1	1	3	0	2	0	7
Women	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	3
Youth	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
Social Disadvantage	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
Totals	**NIL**	**1**	**2**	**8**	**4**	**7**	**1**	**23**
Percentage of Total Sample by AQF Level		**4.3%**	**8.7%**	**34.8%**	**17.4 %**	**30.4 %**	**4.3%**	**100%**

The highest percentage, 34.8% of these customised programs were offered at Certificate II level, with 87% of programs representing Certificate II or lower qualifications. Certificate III and IV programs accounted for 23% of the programs, and no programs at Diploma or higher were part of this group study.

Phase 2 and 3: Customised Programs for individual students supported in mainstream programs

The 13 individual students in this sample were enrolled in mainstream programs at the following AQF levels:

Table 3   Phases 2 and 3: Customised programs for individual students by main target group and AQF level

Target Group	DIP	CIV	CIII	CII	CI	SOA	OTS	Number of

								Programs
Disability	1	2	4	1	0	0	0	8
Indigenous	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
NESB	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	4
Totals	2	2	7	2	0	0	0	13
Percentage of Total Sample by AQF Level	**15.4%**	**15.4%**	**53.8%**	**15.4%**	**0%**	**0%**	**0%**	**100%**

The individual student enrolments reflected higher qualification levels, all students studying at Certificate II level or above. 54% (7 students) were enrolled at Certificate III level, with a further 15.4 % (2 students) at both Diploma and Certificate IV levels.

Findings and discussion

The sample of individual students highlighted multiple disadvantage, complex support needs and a range of individual factors impacting on student completion outcomes. The key insights from the individual sample were the importance of individual support plans including modified or reduced programs to address student learning needs, and the need to evaluate appropriate "endpoints" or success outcomes for the students as part of this support planning process.

Pre-Course Planning

Pre-course planning, including pre-course information, screening and selection processes, induction services or pre-enrolment careers advice were included in the planning for the majority of customised programs and fairly similar strategies were used in the successful and less successful programs.

There was a slightly raised incidence of the interview screening method being used in the groups with more successful completion outcomes so this may be useful to monitor in future evaluation of customised programs to see if it has relevance in a wider sample.

Program Design and Delivery

The less successful programs were not designed for completion, only including a selection of units, or with qualification levels reflecting a performance target rather than a realistic match with either the student goals or capability levels.

Better completion results were achieved in programs for groups with duration of one semester or less, although this did not correlate in the individual student study. The groups that stayed together for the full program and had no choice of electives had higher completion rates than the groups with more choice of electives.

The customised features identified across the different cohorts were consistent with the literature review strategies for classroom based inclusive teaching and learning practices. Flexible assessment options were also highlighted as a distinguishing feature in the programs with the more successful completion outcomes. The inherent assessment requirements were retained, together with flexible assessment options, opportunities for oral assessments, group assessments, portfolio or demonstration based assessments, or opportunities to re-sit assessment tasks.

Support Strategies

There was a positive correlation with provision of support through a Learner Support course enrolment being provided in 77% of the programs with higher completion rates, and in 67% of the less successful programs. Throughout the interview process a range of different models of support provision were identified:

- *ABE/Faculty partnerships* - pre-employment programs with integrated 2 hour per week team teaching for all enrolled students, providing multifaceted delivery of support, across literacy, numeracy, language in context, specific mathematical content, study and organisational skills.
- *SIU/Faculty partnerships* - a mix of customised programs for specific groups of students–ranging from embedded team teaching, stand-alone sessions of up to 3 hours per week in multicultural programs, and a level of Learner Support to match vocational hours of delivery in some disability groups.
- *Specialist Support* - including disability support such as Sign Language Interpreters, Disability Assistants, assistive technology; and specialist teachers with specific experience and skills in working with disadvantage in the areas of the indigenous, multicultural, women and youth community.
- *Specific units of competency* - communication or employability skills units were included in Outreach programs, and a mix of cultural awareness and art units were incorporated to engage the group of Indigenous students with mental health needs.

Many of these variations may be ascribed to the different needs of the cohorts as part of a flexible approach to meeting student needs. However, responses during the interview process, particularly the breadth of interpretation of Learner Support provisions, suggest value in a more integrated approach to course design and learner support provision. In some project case studies foundation skills gaps were being addressed through learner support hours for whole class groups, rather than embedded as part of core course delivery time and reflected in the units of competency achieved by students.

Collaborative partnerships

The programs with partners involved in all elements of the program: planning, promotion, selection, delivery and evaluation of programs, were evident in the most successful completion outcomes for cohort groups and individual student outcomes. However, partnerships were in place to a higher degree in the individual student sample where students had the least successful completion rates.

Systems and Administration

The project findings reinforce the TAFE NSW Strategy Report recommendations for completion communication strategies, to improve the continuous improvement cycle in institute systems and processes. Improved measures are needed to take full account of pathway programs at Certificate II or above, or where a "skills set" is offered to students. This is borne out in the articulation of the 23 cohorts in this survey – where we see a very similar articulation to higher level programs in 2010 from students in the successful and less successful customised 2009 programs.

Conclusions

The customised features demonstrated in all programs in this study were consistent with the literature review strategies for classroom based inclusive teaching and learning practices. The programs with the most successful completion outcomes demonstrated the following inclusive teaching and learning strategies:

- Program design - matching student needs and capability with program content (including electives), AQF level and duration.
- Program duration - shorter targeted programs of 1 semester or less.
- Assessment flexibility such as opportunities for oral or group assessments, portfolio or demonstration based assessments, or opportunities to re-sit assessment tasks.
- Provision of student support-pastoral care, supportive environments, or Learner Support models of integrated team teaching models or "add on" support through tutorial style learner support programs.
- Collaborative Partnerships where partners were involved in planning, promotion, selection, delivery and evaluation.

This research identified the need for both short term and long term recommendations to improve completion outcomes for social inclusion target groups. The key recommendations have been approved. South Western Sydney Institute will continue to monitor a range of Semester 1, 2011 customised programs to improve awareness of local factors impacting on completion outcomes. Workforce capability programs in 2011 will highlight project findings, promoting instructional techniques, Universal Design principles, specific strategies for social inclusion cohort groups; flexible approaches to assessment; as well as reasonable adjustment and learner support.

The Institute will also move to a whole of Institute planning, design and evaluation strategy for social inclusion targeted programs and student support provision to improve qualification completion outcomes, articulation pathways to higher level qualifications, and ensure alignment of service delivery with the demographic of South Western Sydney region.

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