

Completing for Success @ SWSI

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Abstract

The *Completing for Success @ SWSI* project was an Institute initiative focusing on strategies to increase qualification completions across areas of low course completions. Increasing pressure to achieve state and national targets to alleviate the skill shortages and to increase workforce participation and productivity was a key driver for the project. The objective of this research project was to identify, document, evaluate and promote strategies that can be implemented by the Institute to improve qualification completions.

The research project involved eight teams that focused on completions in a particular qualification or groups of related qualifications where data indicated there was a significantly low level of completions, or high risk areas where there were national, state or Institute targets to be addressed. Project teams engaged in research and data analysis to stratify the possible reasons and causes for low course completions to develop strategies that may improve the number of students completing specific qualifications. The project resulted in a research report that identified a broad range of Institute specific strategies and recommendations to improve qualification completions.

Introduction

As part of TAFE NSW's commitment to improve qualification completions in areas of historically low completion rates, the TAFE NSW Executive Group initiated a state-wide action research project *Increasing TAFE NSW qualification completions* project in April 2010. TAFE NSW Institutes were requested to nominate two qualifications with low completion rates to be part of the state-wide project.

South Western Sydney Institute nominated two projects to be part of the TAFE NSW action research project: *Driving Completions for Automotive Mechanics*; and *Let's Complete Business*.

In addition to the TAFE NSW state-wide action research project, South Western Sydney Institute committed funding to support six faculty teams to be part of an institute wide initiative to increase qualification completions. The Institute saw this as a valuable opportunity to expand on the *2006 Survey of Student Withdrawals* project conducted within the South Western Sydney Institute in 2007 and develop a strategic approach to improving qualification completions across all faculties.

A framework to draw all of these elements together was developed into an Institute wide project *Completing for Success @ SWSI*. The relationship between projects which support an Institute wide strategy is shown at Figure 1.



The objectives of the project were for each project team to;

- Conduct literature review relevant to their qualification
- Analyse SWSI statistical data to identify trends; gender, age group and demographics
- Analyse results in line with literature review
- Report findings from research
- Develop strategies to improve completions based on findings from research
- Investigate completion rates across the State
- Prepare recommendations on the future resource development requirements and information provided to students
- Share identified strategies across faculties and the Institute

Project teams across faculties commenced researching the possible reasons and causes for low course completions with the plan to develop strategies that may improve the number of students completing specific qualifications. Teams actively worked on a range of issues impacting on qualification completions identified through literature including:

- identifying Institute industry areas experiencing low completions through data analysis
- reviewing information provided to students and the alignment of student intentions with course requirements
- researching the views of students who have withdrawn
- analysing teaching and learning practices and approaches to course delivery
- investigating specific workplace and community partnerships
- identifying and developing student support strategies and benchmarking activities with other sections and Institutes

Literature Review

It is recognised that the vocational education and training sector plays an important role in alleviating skills shortages, increasing participation in the workforce and increasing productivity in Australia. The 2010 Intergenerational Report (Australian Government, 2010) identifies the expected decline in numbers of workers in proportion to dependants as a major risk factor to future economic growth. This has resulted in all Australian governments increasing public funding to the VET sector to achieve ambitious national targets for increased enrolments and the doubling of qualification completions by 2020.

TAFE NSW Strategy Unit (April, 2010) conducted a comprehensive literature review that focused on recent Australian research on completions. This review identified three key themes that linked completion challenges with proposed solutions:

1. student characteristics and intentions
2. program design and delivery
3. external factors, including labour market conditions

TAFE NSW Strategy Unit (November, 2010) state in their preamble that rather than qualification completion rates, the main performance measure of the Australian VET system has been on module completion rates. However, there is a strong public and professional interest in improving the number of students completing vocational education and training (VET) qualifications, as research indicates this links with employment outcomes. Internationally there is also a trend to directly monitor course completions and Shreeve

(2009), in his research in the United Kingdom identified a strong link between qualification completion and an increase in an individual's earning capacity. Qualification completions are also a focus of the European VET quality framework (CEDEFOP, 2009). New national VET reporting and regulatory arrangements, combined with the planned implementation of a unique identifier for VET students, are likely to ensure completions measures are highlighted in the VET Australian Sector. (VET National Data Strategy Action Group, 2010).

The literature review with the annotated bibliography and the three key themes provided a platform for the Institute research projects and was used extensively by project teams in order to identify trends and confirm literature findings that related to their individual projects. For example four certificate III courses (Automotive, Plumbing, Commercial Cookery and Meat Retailing – Butchery) involved in the “*Completing for Success @ SWSI*” project focused on apprenticeships and referred to significant findings from the literature review including apprentices leaving an apprenticeship in 2007 listed their most significant reason for not completing was: 69.7% employment related followed by 10.1% training related and 10% personal reasons and only 1.4% were attributed to not being happy with off the job training (Karmel and Misko, 2009).

Snell and Hart (2008) research compared the experiences of ‘non-completing’ apprentices with those still in training and found that unpleasant working conditions, low wages, poor quality training and lack of support were common complaints both from the non-completers as well as those still in training. Subsequent research undertaken by Karmel and Mlotkowski (2010) found the main factor apprentices cited for withdrawing within the first three months of their apprenticeship were employment related and involved poor working conditions or non-sympathetic bosses or workmates.

Another project focusing on Certificate II in English for Speakers of other languages concluded that the list of possible reasons for non completion is varied. As summarised by John (2004), these include student characteristics, program design and external factors such as welfare requirements and labour market conditions. Students from non English speaking background are often seen as “at risk” in the VET sector. Other reasons suggested for non completion are that the student loses interest when they find that the course is not going to help them achieve their employment goals. Alternately they may pick up the skills they need well before they complete the course.

Karmel (2008) has emphasised that it is important not to confuse non-completion with failure. The student may have picked up sufficient skills to get a better job and may choose to leave. Strategies such as enrolling in specific skills sets may be the preferred option for some students (Foyster, 2000) and would be more efficient use of our resources. This would also tighten the link between prevocational and vocational training providing a streamlined and efficient approach to vocational training (Moy, 1990).

Recent research conducted by Kennedy & Haines (2008) proposes that students need to understand a range of information relating to employment, career, education and training pathways that are associated with their particular chosen course of study. They conclude that inadequate understanding of this information can be linked to poor completion rates in the VET sector.

The Information Technology project focused on whether there was a causal link between poor understanding of the IT industry and the low qualification completions and examined a range of factors including;

- the prevalence of non completions in long or high level programs;
- the poor outcomes for participants in information technology courses;
- the number of younger students participating;
- low levels of prior education; and
- the lower socio-economic background of some students.

Mitchell and Ward (2010) further suggest that the reasons for non-completion are likely to vary from cohort to cohort and should, therefore, be examined on that basis. TAFE NSW Strategy (November, 2010) state that “a critical message expressed in the research indicates that students usually have more than one reason for not competing, so a multi-faceted approach is needed to improve qualification completions in TAFE NSW. No single solution will work for every student and no single solution will resolve the problem entirely” p.7.

Research method

The *Completing for Success @ SWSI* research project was supported by senior management through mentoring and workshops related to key aspects of the project including team building, risk analysis and research methodologies and strategies. The Institute engaged an external consultant in the early stages of the project to facilitate the teams in developing the action research project: including the review of relevant literature; developing research questions; determining a suitable methodology; and planning where and how to collect data. It was important that institute staff engaging in the research understood the ethical requirements for accessing student information and confidentiality provisions to those being surveyed.

All project teams used a form of action based research to address identified problems relating to qualification completions. The research methodology used for this project incorporated a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Project teams were provided with Institute data sets extracted from the TAFE NSW Data Warehouse for 2007, 2008 and 2009 calendar years. This data enabled project teams to identify qualifications that were experiencing low completions, track individual student pathways and identify student characteristics such as gender, age, NESB, language spoken at home, language and literacy and prior level of schooling. A detailed list of the research methods that were undertaken by each project team is provided at TAB A.

To ensure appropriate rigour in the research representatives from each project team met on three occasions (May, June and September 2010) with VET research specialists. As a result of these meetings teams were able to seek professional guidance, minimise bias, identify sampling strategies and refine the design of their data collection tools, particularly their survey and interview instruments. Project teams saw value in the mixed methods approach in particular for capturing different types of information such as ratings and attitudes and ensuring validation.

The final meeting in September focused on the results of the data collection and the design of the final reports. In discussing the results of the data collection, much of the focus was placed on the importance for the final report of clarifying what had been proved and what required further investigation. In many cases the survey identified issues that were then tested in interviews. For example, in the Improving Technology Completions project quantitative data was collected from students via a survey and quantitative and qualitative data from teachers

via a second survey. Finally, a number of interviews of staff allowed for more in depth discussion of factors raised in the teacher survey.

Findings and discussion

Dr Mitchell prepared the final evaluation report based on the final reports prepared by the project teams, evaluation interviews with Project Sponsor, Carol-Anne Blecich, Project Manager, Rosemary Lasaro and Faculty Project Team Managers.

Mitchell (2010) stated overall findings in his report on p2:

- “..the project teams were effective in identifying reasons for non-completions in the programs they selected for investigation. These reasons were many but often they were similar across different project teams. For instance, many teams found that inadequate information before enrolment might lead to an inappropriate choice of program by the student and affect later success. Teams noted that this can be rectified by the thorough provision of information before enrolment.
- The research showed that there are lessons for both employers and TAFE. On the employer side, workplace conditions such as low pay and workplace responsibilities often contribute to non-completions. On the TAFE side, the quality of teaching, communication between teachers and students and providing feedback for students can increase student satisfaction and ultimately their ability to successfully complete their qualifications.
- The effectiveness of the project teams is demonstrated by their concrete and realistic recommendations about different strategies and processes that can be implemented within the Institute. These include encouraging some students to enrol in specific skills sets, providing early screening to identify new students in need of support and maintaining communication channels with apprentices to identify issues that might influence their study”. p2

Mitchell (2010) also highlighted in his report on p3:

- “While the eight project teams examined completion rates from Certificate I through to Diploma level, many project teams focused around the lower levels, Certificate I - III. This focus on the lower levels included a common if implicit hypothesis among the research teams that these lower levels often are critical points in the journey into post-school education for young students. Team members believed that if these young people can be helped to complete these lower level qualifications, then young students may have more success later in their learning journey.
- In contrast, several teams focused on student groups at the levels of Certificate IV and above, emphasising the point that sometimes students may need additional support once they pass the Certificate III or trade qualification level. It can't be assumed that if students gain a trade certificate they will need minimal support later.
- One theme running through the rationale statements by the teams is that many students at the Institute are from a non-English speaking background and they generally are a diverse group in terms of previous education and cultural background.

Another theme is that many students are young, fresh from school, but have not had academic success at school.

- Project teams commenced the project in the belief that to respond to these diverse needs will almost certainly require multiple initiatives by the staff, not a single initiative or strategy. All project teams sought to identify current or proposed good practice strategies by the Institute staff and other practical steps that could improve completion rates. The selection of student groups for analysis by the eight project teams reveals some of the diversity of the student cohorts in the Institute, including the following:
 - young students straight from school, often with negative experiences at school; or students with disrupted or inadequate schooling, often resulting in low levels of literacy and numeracy
 - people who have experienced long-term unemployment
 - students who have a non-English speaking background, often from refugee or migrant family.”

Conclusions

This research project highlighted that the reasons students do not achieve successful course completion are complex and diverse. Literature and research conducted across the Institute indicates that non-completions were due to a range of factors including job commitments, family responsibilities, time management, transport problems, the level of difficulty to the course, literacy and numeracy issues and the fact that some learners only want specific units not a complete course.

The *Completing for Success @ SWSI* action research project concluded that the most effective strategies to improve qualification completion outcomes in the research samples were:

- Collaborative partnerships
- Professional teaching practice
- Course duration & skill sets
- Pre-enrolment screening & information sessions
- Employer engagement

These key strategies are summarised in diagrammatic form at TAB B, which also provides a snapshot of the key drivers, the eight project teams and action research methodologies underpinning this institute wide initiative. Each project team came up with specific local strategies and recommendations in relation to their specific qualification, program or student cohort.

The Institute has committed to a continuing focus on completions across the institute in 2011. The recognition achieved through the 2010 TAFE NSW Quality Award: Encouragement Award in the category of *Excellence in Learning Outcomes* has also raised awareness and an improved focus at teaching section level on course completion strategies.

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RESEARCH METHODS USED BY EACH PROJECT TEAM

TAB A

KEY FOCUS AREAS	RESEARCH METHODS
APPRENTICESHIP ~ Certificate III in Automotive Mechanical Technology (Light Vehicle) ~ Certificate III and Certificate IV in Plumbing ~ Certificate III in Commercial Cookery (Trade) & Certificate III in Meat Retailing (Butchery Trade)	~ Survey and interview of students, employers, teachers on programs related to the project and industry bodies ~ Survey teachers, Head Teachers and Program design ~ Data analysis such as student enrolments vs. unit completions, student qualification completions by gender, age, NESB, language spoken at home, language and literacy and prior level of schooling
SOCIAL INCLUSION TARGET GROUPS ~ Teaching and Learning strategies to improve qualification completions for social inclusion target and equity groups	~ Cohort specific level to identify situation in relation to specific support, pre-planning and program design and modification for individual targeted programs, and for individual students within mainstream programs ~ Electronic Survey Instrument (via Survey Monkey) and brainstorming sessions ~ Interview instrument ~ Analysis of Institute Data (2007, 2008 & 2009) from TAFE NSW Data warehouse to track completion and articulation for research sample
HIGHER LEVEL QUALIFICATIONS ~ Certificate IV in Small Business ~ Certificate IV and Diploma in Information Technology (Networking)	~ Engaged in literature research and findings from previous studies specific to the discipline area ~ Mixed research methods including action research and qualitative research ~ Study of research literature and findings from previous studies specific to the discipline area ~ Reviewed statistical data in an attempt to profile students who enrol in the qualification across colleges in the Institute including: age, gender, fee payment, employment status, level of previous education ~ Surveying a sample of past students (telephone interviews) & surveying current students – written and in class ~ Questionnaire for head teachers and teachers was developed to provide feedback on possible reasons for non completions.
CERTIFICATE II AND III COURSES ~ Certificate II in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) ~ Certificate II in Hairdressing	~ Case studies and analysing statistics ~ Interviews of past students and new/beginning students ~ Surveys of past students, based on intentions to complete and impact of variables throughout the course ~ Action based research – action and critical reflection and mixed methods including historical research of statistics

