MARKET RESEARCH - A CORE SKILL REQUIREMENT FOR VET PROFESSIONALS IN THE NEW ECONOMY

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Abstract
The VET sector in Australia has undergone substantial transformation over the past decade with the implementation of the Training Reform Agenda and the establishment of a open, competitive and diversified, market focussed training sector in which industry needs determine the programs and services to be provided. To keep pace with these changes, VET providers are making the transformation from community based non-commercial organisations to entrepreneurial new economy organisations. This has had a significant impact on VET practitioners who are now required to take on increasingly diversified and commercial roles within organisations committed to developing enterprise oriented cultures. Many practitioners feel uncomfortable with these changes and ill-equipped to deal with them. They are now expected to acquire detailed knowledge of industry, labour markets and employment options; to evaluate the effectiveness of training investment; to determine stakeholder satisfaction level; and to make sound decisions regarding the provision of programs and services based on research rather than intuition, convenience or ideology. Research has been undertaken to evaluate the new skills, knowledge and attributes required by VET professionals in this new environment, concentrating on skills dealing with new learning arrangements and the use of new technologies. This paper puts the proposition that, in addition to these skills, market research skill development (qualitative and quantitative) has become a core requirement for VET practitioners, to ensure understanding of the new demands being placed on them as well as providing them with the tools and techniques to enable them to be more effective in their new roles.
The scope and pace of change that has occurred in the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector over the past decade has been unprecedented. External factors outside the education market have brought about some of this change. Globalisation, technological advances, the opening up of economies, e-commerce, increased international competition for goods and services, the movement from mass consumerism to personalisation of products and services and the emphasis on innovation and knowledge management are worldwide drivers for change. The impact of these are being felt on societal structures, labour markets and workplace environments. Enterprises are now moving towards being structured around autonomous and creative teams in which all the players are flexible, client focussed and have a market emphasis.

The Australian education and training market has also been affected by policy driven changes from both Federal and State governments aimed at opening up the sector to become a competitive, commercial and diversified market. Technical and Further Education (TAFE), which was once the only publicly funded vocational educational institution in Australia, is now only one of many providers. Schools, universities, industry, employer groups, community, group training centres, and private providers are all now part of the VET landscape. Although TAFE remains the dominant provider it is now under significant pressure to perform and produce quality outcomes. This situation is likely to increase over time rather than decrease. TAFE Institutes now compete for student contact and subject hours based on market intelligence regarding geographical and industry emerging and declining areas of skill demand. Other major structural reforms within the Australian VET market over this period include the development and implementation of the National Training Framework (NTF), Training Packages and the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF) arrangements which have led to the establishment of national curriculum, new curriculum design and assessment and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) methods.

The emergence of an open and competitive market within VET has resulted in a complex and changing environment.

- students now have a greater number of choices and are increasingly aware of their power to choose between training providers
• changes in the nature and types of stakeholders and their expectations of performance from training providers
• continually changing demand for courses and skills responding to changes in both declining and emerging areas of client demand
• the establishment and strong growth of formal vocational courses accredited within the secondary schools sector.
• increased competition from national and international providers of on-line learning
• a greater emphasis on fee-for-service courses and enterprise projects and consultancies
• increasing interest in developing overseas markets and in attracting students from overseas
• more cooperative training arrangements with industry that are requiring new and different sorts of staff skills and attitudes
• changes within the structure of the TAFE workforce - the proportion of teachers compared to support staff within workforce has diminished, gender distribution changes, a lengthening of the average hours of employment and changes in type of employment contracts being offered with an increase in contract and sessional teachers rather than those in full time, on-going positions.
• changing staff development needs - the necessity of retraining staff who are working in declining subject or skill areas and placing them in growth areas and areas of emerging need.

TAFE Institutes are being transformed from community based non-commercial organisations into entrepreneurial new economy organisations. Although TAFE remains a government agency, bound by the policies and regulations imposed on it by the political situation, it is still, nonetheless, operating in a commercial environment. Providers are now in the 'business of VET'. Economic rationalism has had an impact. Performance indicators and measures, profitability, business accountability and efficiency, the need to be leaner, the development and marketing of commercial products and services and focusing on customers and the marketplace are now imperatives within Institutes.
To successfully respond to the rapidly changing VET environment in which they now operate, TAFE Institutes must find ways of changing internally. This includes the development and espousal of a strong enterprise-oriented culture within its own workforce, such as that which exists in private industry. This requires all staff, both teaching and support, to be externally focussed and to develop commercial business principles and practices in their operation, processes and procedures within the organisation. TAFE Institutes, like other employers striving to be New Economy organisations, rate highly those staff who are flexible, able to adapt and cope with uncertainty, motivated, team players, problem solvers, able to undertake research and be entrepreneurial and innovative thinkers.

Institutes have increasingly high expectations that their staff will become multi-skilled and take on numerous work functions for which they have had no formal training. The days of fixed work roles, clear lines of responsibility and predicability are over.

The traditional role of the VET professional is changing.

- there is greater emphasis on teachers becoming industry practitioners. As workplaces undergo change, the industry knowledge and skills required by employers is now often judged in terms of the value that can be added to the organisation rather than the technical knowledge gained through undertaking a module or course.
- teachers are starting to be seen as responsible for students ongoing learning
- there is great emphasis on understanding the marketplace, on the gathering and analysis of business and market intelligence and forecasting training demand by sector and region
- the need to understand stakeholders real requirements and to deliver what the client requires, at a time and place that suits, in a manner that is suitable and at a price that is affordable.
- providing of a wide variety of personally tailoring information, guidance and advice to students regarding employment opportunities, careers, counselling, finance etc
• developing workforce planning, administrative and support skills to take on additional functions relating to managing the increase in the number of sessional and short term contract teachers now being employed in the training system. (OPCETE 2000)

• shifting emphasis from training the individual to meeting corporate objectives.

Accompanying this change in roles for the VET professionals is the requirement to increase their knowledge and skills, not as it is related to the content of a subject and/or course, but rather to deal with strategic and organisational functions imposed on them as a response to the changing market conditions in which Institute now operates.

Although teaching duties will always be at the core of their responsibilities, additional tasks which are now part of the evolving new role for VET professionals include:

• developing expertise in the use of new media technologies in instructional design and delivery through e-Learning

• researching and understanding the educational and training needs of all stakeholders and client groups.

• building relationships with industry and the community to determine course content and preferred delivery modes.

• establishing students, employers, community and government perceptions of a course or program, quality of delivery etc

• undertaking client evaluations regarding satisfaction with the range and usage of programs, services and facilities offered by the department, campus and Institute

• undertaking marketing functions such as analysing demographics in order to develop communication strategies to best publicise courses

• gaining knowledge of competitors activities, competitive products and services as well as competitive pricing

• forecasting emerging skill demand areas as well as areas of decline

• generating new enterprise opportunities.
The rapid pace of change in the education and training environment has left many VET professionals feeling uncomfortable and struggling to handle the new directions and priorities of TAFE. Teachers, when referring to their occupation and working life, are still more comfortable with descriptors that are reminiscent of a public service environment. They do not easily embrace the imperatives and jargon of private enterprise. Many teachers believe that the concepts of social justice, accessibility and diversity, in which they believe passionately, are, in their minds, contradictory with the concept of economic rationalism.

Research undertaken previously to evaluate the new skills, knowledge and attributes required for VET in the 21st century (Chappell & Melville 1995, NCVER 1990) has found that TAFE professionals need to reinvent themselves to undertake the roles demanded of them in this new VET environment. Not only are the organisations in which they work changing, their place and understanding of their role in the world of education is no longer the same. Teachers are now being asked to 'do things differently' (Chappell 1998).

Institutes cannot assume that all teachers comprehend the corporate imperative of moving to a more enterprise-oriented culture let alone readily embracing this new culture. Institutes also cannot assume that all teachers have the necessary knowledge to create a bridge between the world of public service in which they previously operated and the world of private enterprise in which they now find themselves or indeed the skills to be effective with the new roles and responsibilities that are now being demanded of them. The mix of skills, knowledge, tools and techniques required to provide the balance between entrepreneurial endeavours and the crucial social and educational contribution that TAFE has always provided has training and development implications.

Professional development has in the past concentrated on the more traditional skill sets of instruction and delivery. In more recent years performance and quality related outcomes have been a priority. With the rapid changes in technology and the structural reforms in the training system in Australia, there has now been a shift in focus to concentrate on the development of skills and knowledge dealing with the implementation of the sector's reforms, flexible learning and e-learning design and
delivery. Most Institutes also undertake some professional development, primarily aimed at middle and general management levels, in broad organisational skill sets dealing with leadership, teams, consultancy, project and management skills.

However, Institutes do need to recognise that the success of their organisations are dependent upon general staff understanding and adopting the new demands being placed on them and provide a formalised way of easing their way through this process rather than imposing changes from the top. To this end, professional development aimed at equipping teachers with the appropriate tools and techniques to fit them for the new roles and responsibilities that come with these demands is critical.

The primary tools and techniques for this are:

- the ability to focus on the global market ('big picture') and awareness and understanding of corporate objectives
- the skills to investigate, gather and analyse data pertaining to market changes and opportunities
- knowledge to allow them to access information from a range of sources both internally and externally
- qualitative techniques to explore and analyse issues, processes, attitudes and behaviours
- quantitative techniques to provide measurement when gathering and analysing responses to issues, ensuring that the focus, brevity, clarity and format of questions are correct.

In other words, providing these staff with market research skills.

Market research is a formalised, customer-focussed, systematic approach to the investigation, planning, collection and analysis of information about the marketplace. It is already used to some degree throughout Institutes at the corporate level, and to a lesser extent, at departmental and program level. Certainly most teachers have strong qualitative skills - an interest in people, empathy, non-judgemental attitude and well developed art of asking questions and listening. Qualitative techniques, as a method for gathering information from students in a classroom, even in an informal manner, is currently a very underrated tool. Teachers do make use of quantitative techniques, the most typically used tool being a survey, for module and course evaluations and student satisfaction surveys. The gathering and usage of market intelligence is very
often ad hoc and unstructured with relevant sources of information at times unknown or considered too difficult to access. Staff, to be more effective and productive in their jobs, need to be able to develop, expand and strengthen these skills and to utilize them on behalf of the organisation as well as for their students.

The development of market research skills would not only have a benefit for individual staff members but would also assist the Institute at a strategic level. Institutes, in their metamorphosis from public sector organisations to New Economy private enterprises, have been looking more and more to market research to advise them about market opportunities and assist in making informed commercial decisions. In the past, intuition, experience, collective knowledge and organisational interest were the most common basis for decision making, particularly in regard to the demand and provision of courses and programs. This often proved to be sufficient. However, with the move away from the relatively secure position that TAFE Institutes held in traditional markets which were, to a large extent, based on predetermined geographical catchments to a competitive world where one of the critical success factors is the awareness and understanding of all stakeholders needs and requirements, there is now a strong need for a more formalised approach to market research for decision making. It is now no longer enough to rely on intuition and experience or to allow an 'if we build it, they will come’ mentality.

Although this paper is not seeking to address the competencies that would be required for market research professional development, it should be noted that the skills and knowledge associated with this approach are not complex, do not rely on advanced statistical ability and should strengthen and complement professional skills already acquired.

Such training for VET professionals would assist both staff and Institutes to remain competitive and relevant and contribute to a vibrant and effective state training system with the capability to be a world leader in VET provision into the 21st century. An appropriate balance should, of course, be struck between professional development for staff to maintain and/or update the skills required for currency of instructional development and delivery and professional development to enable staff to develop the skills, competence, knowledge and attitudes to participate in achieving
strategic organisational objectives. It must always be remembered that although roles and responsibilities of VET professionals may change this will always be in addition to their primary role of teaching.
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