Flexible training strategies for social and community services: A case study

Berwyn Clayton and Lola Krogh

Introduction

In 1996, we commenced research into a range of issues associated with the delivery of the Diploma in Community Services (Welfare Studies). This work was undertaken as part of the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) Institute Assessment Project where individual teachers are allocated time to examine their assessment practice in order to identify mechanisms for improving learning outcomes.

This research project gave us the opportunity to work together to develop approaches beyond the more commonplace modes of delivery. It involved considerable critical reflection upon how we had been delivering and assessing training for the social and community services industry. It soon became clear that we needed to make major adjustments to our programs. Through trial, error and a good deal of debate, ideas for new approaches gradually evolved. These ideas were not grounded simply in curriculum or assessment change, but in innovative training arrangements which involved training partnerships between institutes of technology and individuals, and CIT and employers.

Forming the partnerships: Seeking the views of industry

This idea of forming training partnerships has required a considerable shift in approach for CIT teachers, managers and administrators. There is now a clear need to move training out into the community and to identify the preferred delivery modes and the training priorities of our clients. To do this effectively, appropriate information needed to be collected from the key stakeholders.

The project manager raised issues of training with managers and staff in a selection of agencies drawn from various fields in the industry. These fields included drug and alcohol, youth justice, women’s services, child protection services, Aboriginal services
and other relevant agencies. A focus group for CIT teachers and managers, industry representatives, the relevant unions and professional association, together with staff from the Australian Capital Territory Vocational Education and Training Authority was also held. This group discussed the concept of multiple training options and provided important additional input and support for the introduction of new approaches.

The first outcome of this information-gathering process was a general acknowledgment that CIT’s Department of Community Development needed to unpack the existing curriculum to make it more flexible. In this way we could develop packages of training which were more relevant and more accessible for potential clients.

Innovative training arrangements: Agencies and individuals

Over a period of 12 months, the department has implemented a range of delivery strategies. These strategies include CIT-based delivery incorporating managed work-based learning projects; a combination of on-campus and workplace delivery; workplace delivery in partnership with the employer; workplace delivery in partnership with the employee and print-based external studies.

Training arrangement 1: Managed work-based learning projects

This option entails CIT-based delivery incorporating managed work-based projects. It is an enhancement of the traditional on-campus delivery with a field placement component. To provide greater flexibility for on-campus students we have incorporated managed work-based learning projects into the final semester of a two-year study program. The modules ‘community work 2’, ‘field integration professional seminars 2’ and ‘field placement 2’ are clustered to provide sufficient opportunity for students to demonstrate their abilities and meet the essential criteria for competence. These reality-based projects involve the student developing a concept proposal based on their own research and then negotiating with an agency to form a working partnership. The CIT teachers provide support for this process and assist in the clarification of project goals and planning. In every case, there is a requirement for the project to be realistic, useful and valued by the agency and the community. Ownership is seen as critical and this is further confirmed by industry involvement in student assessment.

Training arrangement 2: Integrated delivery

This arrangement involves a combination of on-campus and workplace delivery. Students are able to choose the learning modes in a mix which best suits their work and family commitments and their individual learning styles. As a consequence, some students are choosing to study the more practical modules based around a managed work-based learning project while attending classes for more theoretical components of the course. Other students are electing to do a completely different study mix.
Training arrangement 3: Work-based learning partnership with an agency

As a result of the liaison with industry, it was identified that a local juvenile justice facility was staffed by workers who had a strongly identified need for relevant and accessible training. In response to this need, a Certificate IV in Community Services—Youth Justice was developed by our department. An additional module, ‘rehabilitation and reparation’ was developed to meet the particular needs of this client. The ACT Department of Youth Justice has demonstrated its commitment to this training partnership by paying the CIT fees and providing a workplace training room for workplace workshops and tutorials. This program is being delivered as a pilot project, and delivery and assessment are done entirely on the job. An evaluation is being undertaken to determine comparative costs of the on- and off-job training components.

Training arrangement 4: Work-based learning partnership with individuals

The New South Wales Department of Community Services (Queanbeyan) is confronting similar training issues with their employees. Many workers have been with the department for a considerable period of time and they have developed skills through workplace experience, in-house training and departmental staff development programs. While this is extremely valid and valuable training, it provides no formally recognised qualification.

The New South Wales Department of Community Services (Queanbeyan) invited CIT to present the range of new training options at a team meeting, and managers have actively encouraged their workers to negotiate individual training plans with CIT. The learners who are involved in the training are asked to select a mentor in their own workplace. This mentor has to have sufficient time available to support the learner and cannot be an immediate supervisor. The processes for setting up the individual training plans for workers are similar to those employed with the ACT Department of Youth Justice.

Training arrangement 5: Print-based external studies

In moving towards more flexible delivery approaches it became evident that learning resources needed to be developed to support the programs. The project manager was able to access funding from the CIT Innovative Project to customise existing study guides and develop books of readings for the core modules of the Diploma of Community Services (Welfare). The development of these learning resources has allowed us to offer print-based external studies. This option has been particularly important for students moving interstate who wish to complete their studies.

Flexible training strategies for social and community services: A case study
Acceptance of these new training arrangements

The implementation of managed work-based learning projects has been a resounding success. They have been readily accepted by learners because they have considerable face validity.

Acceptance by industry has been indicated by the willingness of organisations to be further involved in managed work-based learning projects. Currently, agencies are offering more potential projects than our learners are able to take on.

Additional training arrangements are currently being negotiated.

Benefits for the key players

There are considerable benefits of a multi-faceted approach to the delivery of training.

Any learner is able to access a range of flexible training options based on individual needs. Newly developed learning resources, improved access to workplaces and a full range of workplace experiences have enhanced the quality of the learning process.

Furthermore, CIT has negotiated articulation arrangements with Charles Sturt University and the University of Canberra to ensure relevant pathways into higher education for workers across the industry.

In future, it is also envisaged that through these training partnerships, workers in the field with a CIT diploma and an appropriate level of experience, will be able to gain credit into the Graduate Diploma in Social Science or the Graduate Diploma in Community Development at the University of Western Sydney. These programs will provide the development of specialisations in the fields of child protection, community education and community services. Such links gives true credence to the validity of workplace learning.

For an industry which is attempting to break away from the age-old concept of welfare provision strongly supported by volunteerism, these strategies offer workplaces a time-effective training solution that meets the changing demands of their organisation.

From an institutional and departmental perspective, the Department of Community Development staff and CIT are also gaining considerable benefits. Staff are working closely with industry and other tertiary institutions. This provides them with the opportunity to renew or maintain the currency of their vocational knowledge and skills. Their willingness to work this way adds to their credibility and acceptance in industry and provides them with increased opportunities for networking, research and further development. The success of the new initiatives has generated further, more interesting work and strong support from within the institute. The innovations have increased the numbers enrolled in the institute courses and have improved the department’s commercial edge in the current competitive training environment.

Finally, the outcomes of managed workplace learning projects which are utilised in all delivery approaches, offer community-based agencies significant opportunities for
important project development. The publications, guidelines, needs analyses and new services generated from these projects significantly improve service provision to the wider community.

Learning from the experience

We have learned that the critical element for success in these new arrangements is the provision of support to learners as needed throughout their training. They also need quality information and the opportunity to interact regularly with teachers on issues and concerns associated with their study. It has also been important that we provide clear information to all partners in the training process. Regular discussion with workplaces, supervisors and mentors ensures that we are all working in the same direction.

What of the future?

We will continue to negotiate with key players in the social welfare and community services industry to provide training which is designed specifically for the needs of their workers. In addition, we will work with universities to develop broader and clearer pathways for the graduates of our training into appropriate higher education programs. These too, we are hoping, will be delivered in an equally flexible and accessible mode.