A quality teaching and learning framework for community colleges.

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Abstract

In VET our trainers and assessors are our most valuable asset and arguably our least cared for resource. Convention in planning training tells us there should be detailed course planning, careful attention to RTO compliance and quality data, careful selection of materials and validation of assessment, but in the end, the quality of the service we provide to our learners is entirely dependent on the quality and performance of the trainer.

How do we ensure this quality and support professional development? A Community College Quality VET Teaching and Learning Framework would provide guidance to managers in performance management and help them to support their most valuable asset. Such a framework could also provide a pathway for trainers and assessors to further develop their skills.

Recent research has focused on the quality of VET trainer qualifications (Clayton 2009, 2010), the need for continuing professional development and exploration of VET pedagogies (Wheelahan 2011, Mitchell & Ward 2010, Productivity Commission 2011) and the possibility of a VET professional association (Clayton & Guthrie 2011). IBSA has commissioned a report into the development of a VET Capability Framework which has reviewed capability frameworks from a number of industry areas and carefully analysed the perceived professional development needs of VET trainers and assessors from the point of view of the RTO (Precision Consultancy, 2011).

The Community College Quality VET Teaching and Learning Framework research will give a voice to the trainers and assessors themselves by exploring their experiences regarding professional development and performance management. It will also allow a comparison of their voice with the voice of managers in Community Colleges in NSW.

The research will be conducted in 3 phases:

Phase 1 (To be completed by February 2012): Conduct a literature review covering: existing teaching and learning frameworks from other education sectors; best practice in performance management; professional development models for teachers; Continuing professional development schemes for trainers; recommendations from Skills Australia and SNR requirements; IBSA VET Capability Framework recommendations.

Phase 2 (To be completed by April 2012): Investigate the perspective of trainers and assessors by surveying their experiences of current practices in performance management and perceived needs in professional development. Investigate current
practices in professional development and performance management via individual interviews with college managers

Phase 3: (To be completed by October 2012) Develop a draft Quality Teaching and Learning Framework OR recommend adoption of an existing framework, possibly with modifications - as per findings of research

1. Introduction

This research will focus on Community Colleges in NSW who are members of Cooperative Learning Ltd.

Community Colleges in NSW are a closely associated group of forty three individual RTOs. In 2010, Community Colleges in NSW delivered more than 6 million hours of training to approximately 102,000 students in 500 locations (towns/suburbs) including remote and rural locations. (Adult and Community Education Unit 2010)

Cooperative Learning Ltd. is a legal cooperative comprised of seventeen of these Community Colleges. The Cooperative Learning Ltd colleges are based in regional NSW, in the northern region of the State.

While Community Colleges view themselves as a reasonably homogenous sector, (Walker 2010) each college is managed independently. Colleges practice a variety of approaches in recruiting, managing and developing their trainers and assessors.

This variety of individualised approaches may have sufficed in the past, however, as we look to the future such approaches may not produce the required results. It is becoming increasingly evident that a more highly skilled VET workforce is required and that management of capability development and human resource management practices can play a key role in meeting the challenges of skills needs and VET professionalism. (Wheelahan 2010)

A unified and well supported approach to human resource development in the Community College sector will be needed. A quality teaching and learning framework could help build capacity of the Community College sector as well as the individual trainers and assessors within that system.


This project will draw on the research being conducted by others, and intends to either recommend the adoption of an existing framework, possibly with modification
for the Community College context, or recommend the development of a framework
designed specifically for the Community College sector.

This research has been funded by Cooperative Learning Ltd. and the NSW Government via the ACE Unit of NSW Department of Education and Communities. The final results of this research will be distributed to Community Colleges in NSW and Victoria and published on a number of websites including the NSW DEC ACE Unit Netfirst site, Community Colleges Australia Online Network and Cooperative Learning Ltd. website (http://www.cooperativelearning.com.au).

2. Literature review

The Community College Quality Teaching and Learning Research Project is very well
timed to take advantage of many other research projects and reports looking at the
quality of VET teaching, capability development and VET workforce development needs.

This literature review will attempt to provide a picture of the drivers behind the
interest in exploring a Community College quality teaching and learning framework.

In 2010 the Productivity Commission conducted a comprehensive review of the VET Workforce as part of a wider COAG strategy to review the workforce development needs of the early childhood, school and VET sectors.

The Commission found that there were some gaps in the capability of the existing
workforce to meet current demands, but more importantly that those gaps would
widen in the future as,

A confluence of demographic, economic and regulatory factors will
introduce greater challenges for the VET sector over coming years.
(Australian Government 2011, Pg XXVIII)

This confluence of factors include greater demand for VET training; our aging
population; tightening labour market and increasing skills shortages; immigration;
economic and structural change creating new skills, and changing old skills
requirements; increasing training objectives including foundation skills, sustainability
skills employability skills new technology skills; and the push to higher level
qualifications. All of these factors will increase the need for professionalism of the
VET workforce.

Demands on VET teachers and trainers are increasing as work changes,
skill requirements increase, new industries emerge, society becomes
more complex, and VET is called upon to deliver more ambitious
government objectives. Wheelahan 2011, pg 16
The Productivity Commission research found a lot of support for more structured professional development for trainers and assessors and a capability framework was specifically mentioned as one avenue to achieving this. (Australian Government 2011 Pg XLVII) Recommendation 10.9 specifically states,

Registered Training Organisations should identify capability needs within their own workforces and target funding accordingly. (Australian Government 2011, Pg LVII)

Recommendation 10.10 of the Productivity Commission Report states,

As a matter of priority, Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA) should develop qualifications and Skill Sets so that the TAE10 Training and Education Training Package more completely covers the diversity of roles within the VET workforce, and reflects a full capability framework for the workforce. The Package should then form the basis for advice from IBSA to the sector on continuing professional development options that address capability gaps. (Australian Government 2011, Pg LV)

In May 2011 Skills Australia published *Skills for prosperity a roadmap for vocational education and training*, which like the Productivity Commission Report, called for a national VET workforce development strategy to assist the VET workforce to meet the challenges of the future. One of the proposed features of the workforce development strategy was “…a comprehensive instrument to measure and describe the VET workforce.” (Skills Australia 2011, Pg 97)

In response to both these papers, IBSA has begun development of the VET Capability Framework. This is the first step in IBSA responding to the Productivity Commission recommendation that more diverse career paths in VET be mapped and accommodated within the TAE10 training package. Once created, these additional qualifications or skill sets could form the basis of advice to individuals regarding career development and skills required to meet the future needs of the VET workforce.

The IBSA VET Capability Framework is of great interest to the Community College quality teaching and learning framework project. We will be contributing to the development of this framework in the hope that it may meet our needs and so far discussion in our team has focussed on the pros and cons of adopting a national framework if one exists as opposed to developing a sector specific framework.

Another strategy to improve VET workforce development explored by the Productivity Commission and Wheelahan (2010) is the development of a VET professional body and possibly a registration scheme. While the Commission did not recommend the adoption of a registration scheme, the idea of a professional body for VET practitioners has received some attention.
Hugh Guthrie and Berwyn Clayton have both produced recent research into the quality of VET teacher training (Clayton 2010, Guthrie et al. 2011) and have worked together to conduct a scoping study followed by a survey and focus group discussions exploring the feasibility of an association for VET professionals. (Clayton B. Guthrie H. 2011). One question raised in their scoping study relates to the eligibility criteria for membership of a national association of VET professionals and whether or not it would be appropriate to have levels of membership. This question and many others raised in the scoping study point to the possibility of a capability framework or quality teaching and learning framework against which to measure levels of membership, but also as a tool for planning professional development for members.

Finally, another area of literature which has informed the concept of a quality teaching and learning framework for Community Colleges is around human resource management in registered training organisations. Hawke (2008) found a common tendency for professional development to be linked to performance management as opposed to strategic direction. Thus professional development was often offered as a fix for remedial performance or failure, rather than as an opportunity for capacity building, growth and exploration.

Smith and Hawke (2008) found that human resource management in private (non TAFE) RTOs was often informal, largely the domain of the CEO and yet, strangely, not necessarily strategic in its approach. Experience in the Community College sector suggests that this is a familiar scenario.

Recent research in the Community Colleges sector into evaluation practices (Walker 2011) indicates that many of the questions in course evaluation surveys were in fact aimed at gathering data for performance management of trainers and assessors. While this is not the only source of data used to inform performance management and is by no means the only source of data used to inform professional development decisions, it was felt that there was opportunity for improvement in the focus of Community Colleges on the role and purpose of professional development in human resource management.

It is hoped that a quality teaching and learning framework for Community Colleges may broaden the focus of managers and trainers and assessors with regard to capacity building and professional development.

3. Research process

Research questions:

- What could a quality teaching and learning framework for Community Colleges look like?
- How could it be used by managers and by trainers?
- How is professional development currently managed in Community Colleges?
- Is there any value to having a specific QTLF for Community Colleges? Or would we benefit more from sharing the same QTLF adopted by other VET RTOs?

A mixed method approach has been employed to allow the collection of quantitative data and the further interrogation of this data through qualitative methods.

The research will be conducted in 3 phases:

Phase 1: A literature review covering: existing teaching and learning frameworks from other education sectors; best practice in performance management; professional development models for teachers; Continuing professional development schemes for trainers; recommendations from Skills Australia and SNR requirements; IBSA VET Capability Framework recommendations.

Phase 2 (To be completed by end April 2012): This phase will investigate the perspective of trainers and assessors by surveying their experiences of current practices in performance management and provision of professional development. This investigation will be conducted via online survey and will focus on the collection of mostly quantitative data. The surveys will be anonymous, and participants will be offered the option of providing contact details for further investigation.

Semi structured individual interview will follow to acquire complementary qualitative data and also to test and confirm some of the findings emerging from the survey data. Participants for the individual interviews will be selected from a sub-strata of survey participants based on those who volunteer for the role and representing diverse experience regarding professional development and career management for VET trainers and assessors.

Support for the online surveying of trainers and assessors will be provided by Cooperative Learning Ltd who will offer confirmation of privacy and confidentiality of data. Individual college managers will provide support by distributing online surveys to trainers. The Community Colleges Australia Online Network, an informal network of trainers and assessors, will also be used as a distribution point for the surveys.

Also in Phase 2 will be the investigation of the perspective of college managers with regard to current practices in professional development and performance management. This investigation will take the form of an online survey followed by semi structured interviews to gather case studies from individual managers.

Data from trainers and managers will be considered to ascertain if there is a difference in perception between the two groups with regard to performance management and professional development options.
Phase 2 has also involved College Managers reviewing the IBSA VET Capability Framework via focus group discussion.

Phase 3: (To be completed by October 2012) Develop a draft Community College Quality Teaching and Learning Framework OR recommend adoption of an existing framework, possibly with modifications - as per findings of research

4. Findings and discussion

While findings are limited by the fact that surveys have not yet been conducted there has been some data gathered so far in the project relating to college managers’ response to the Draft IBSA VET Capability Framework.

Focus groups were held to familiarise college managers with the recently released Draft VET Capability Framework and responses gathered. It was found that college managers generally viewed the Draft VET Capability Framework very favourably. They found it simple and easy to use. They identified the following potential uses of the Framework:

- Determining practitioner current capability
- Developing job descriptions, trainer/assessor expectations, VET position advertising
- Performance monitoring
- Determining rates of pay
- Trainer/assessor induction processes
- Guide for VET Coordinator or Manager in selecting appropriate VET trainer/assessor for task
- Determination of professional development pathways and continuous improvement opportunities

Some suggestions were made regarding items that needed to be included in the VET Capability Framework including trainer’s research capability, wide knowledge and skill in implementing evaluation strategies, and embedding of education for sustainability principles and practices. This feedback has been passed on to IBSA for consideration.

The project plan for the Community College Quality Teaching and Learning Framework (QTLF) was developed prior to the IBSA Draft VET Capability Framework being released. Since its release the QTLF project team have been debating the pros and cons of continuing with the development of a separate framework. It is perceived that there are both advantages and disadvantages to having a sector specific quality teaching and learning framework and this debate will continue at least until the final version of the IBSA VET Capability Framework is published.

At this stage, however, it is the thinking of the researcher that the potential benefits of adopting the IBSA VET Capability Framework for the Community College
sector far outweigh the disadvantages. Such advantages include transferability and benchmarking opportunities. Disadvantages include the loss of the opportunity to focus on and build upon the specific pedagogies and functions of the Community College sector.

5. Conclusions

The Quality Teaching and Framework for Community Colleges project will explore the perception and practices of Community College managers and trainers and assessors with regard to workforce development. Benefits will include an increased focus on human resource management, capacity, professional development and career planning in VET. It is hoped that the project will generate a greater support for our most valuable asset: our trainers.

The final outcomes of this project will be very much dependent on developments with the IBSA Capability Framework.

It is hoped that by the end of 2012, Community Colleges in NSW will be much better resourced to support trainers and assessors, and have a framework with which to guide their professional development and management. This outcome will assist Community Colleges to be more responsive and professional in their many roles including their role in supporting Australia’s skills needs, participation and social inclusion agendas.

6. References


Discussion Paper prepared for IBSA