Insights into Foundation Skills Provision by Community Education Providers in Regional Australia

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National Research
NCVER
Adelaide, SA
NCVER project “Provision of foundation programs by community education providers in rural and regional Australia and its implications for VET”
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Principal researchers
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  - Dr Mandy Mihelic, Research Officer, NCVER

Partners
  - Community Colleges Australia (CCA)
  - Project Advisory Committee
Project aim

• To characterise good practice in the provision of enabling and foundation skills courses by community education providers (CEPs) in regional and remote areas
  • Compare patterns for regional and remote based providers with metropolitan providers
  • How do these practices contribute to building human and social capital in regional and rural areas?
  • Do they help people undertake VET?
Foundation Skills Definition

- Language, literacy and numeracy + employability skills
  - Definition can be contentious (inclusion of employability skills)
  - Also differences in preferred terminology amongst practitioners (“basic skills”, “enabling skills” etc)
Community Education Provider Definition

• A not-for-profit, community-based organisation with a primary focus on adult education.
  – Delivers courses relating to leisure, personal and community development, employment skills, preparation for VET and nationally recognised programs of study.
Methods

- Analysis of Total VET Activity collection held by NCVER
  - Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) only
    - includes CEPs if they are RTOs – not all are
    - Inconsistent coding of foundation skills

- Analysis of characteristics of callers to Reading Writing Hotline

- National survey of community education providers

- In-depth interviews with selected CEPs and other community representatives across regional and metropolitan Australia
Survey results

- Emails requesting participation sent to CEPs via
  - via CCA, RWH and ALA mailing lists
  - peak bodies in each State (Neighbourhood Houses, State agencies for adult literacy etc)
  - anyone else in the field we could find using google searches

- Estimated ~1500 CEPs Australia-wide providing FSk in 2018 (based on Bowman 2017)

- Input on coverage via CCA conference workshop

- Piloted with workshop participants

- Online survey live from mid December 2018 – early February 2019
N responses = 114
Sample composition – provider type and location

• Of the 114 respondents
  – 49 were from Community Colleges or other organisations focused solely on adult education
  – 61 were from Neighbourhood or Community Houses or other organisations which provide adult foundation skill courses in addition to other functions
  – 3 from referral or other administrative agencies
  – 1 other/not stated
## Distribution of responses by State

<table>
<thead>
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<th>In which State or Territory are you based?</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>0.9</td>
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<td>1.8</td>
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<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>100</td>
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Results

• Respondent characteristics
  – Provider type
  – Location
  – Organisation size

• Results
  – Administration
  – Courses offered
  – Barriers and motivations for students
  – Impact on social capital
Metropolitan and regional location (self-reported)

- Metropolitan: n=50
- Regional or remote: n=49
- Both metro and non-metro: n=12
Average number of Foundation Skills students per year over last 3 years

- Metropolitan
- Regional or remote or both metro and R&R

Per cent all respondents

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<th>Regional or remote or both metro and R&amp;R</th>
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<tr>
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</table>
Types of Foundation Skills Courses Currently Delivered

- Foundation skills
- General interest
- Other_preaccredited
- Accredited VET
- Unaccredited VET
- Other

- Regional (includes remote or both metro and regional) (n=61)
- Metropolitan (n=49)
Has provider ability to deliver foundation skills courses changed over last 3 years?

- No change, has always been difficult
- No change, has never been a problem
- Don't know
- Yes – it has become more difficult
- Yes, it is easier now
Why it is difficult or has become more difficult
(69% of Victorian respondents; 56% rest of Australia) Multiple response

- Insufficient funding
- Enrolment processes
- State legislation/compliance requirements
- Insecure funding
- Implementation of training content
- Student assessment
- Federal legislation/compliance requirements
- Other
- Acquittal processes (accounting for how funds are spent)
- None
- Company registration

Regional (includes remote or both metro and regional) (n=61)
Metropolitan (n=50)
Respondent perceptions of barriers for students who need foundation skills (multiple response)

- Personal issues (e.g. lack of confidence, anxiety, …)
- Lack of awareness that course is available
- Learning disabilities
- Availability of childcare
- Lack of/costs of transport
- Poor time management skills/punctuality
- No internet access
- Drug use
- Enrollment process is intimidating
- Time of day that course is offered
- Other
- Too much assessment
- Existing courses don't meet particular needs
- Poor customer service from providers
- Poor LLN in first place
- Poverty
- Too tired after working all day

Regional (includes remote or both metro and regional) (n=53)
Metropolitan (n=46)
Respondent perceptions of main motivations for students (multiple response)

- To gain employment
- To facilitate further study
- To be able to communicate with family and community
- Required by Centrelink
- Personal goal
- Don't know

Metropolitan vs Regional or remote or both metro and R&R
Respondent perceptions of reasons for students not completing FSk course (multiple response)

- Logistical
- Health
- To take up work
- No interest
- Other
- Fear of assessment
- Material too advanced
- Too much assessment
- Material too basic
- Don't know
How many students completed their FSk course over last 3 years?

- Metropolitan
- Regional or remote or both metro and R&R

- All, or almost all
- Most
- About half
- Less than half
- Don't know
Do providers track FSk student outcomes?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Other (please specify)

Responses by region:
- Metropolitan
- Regional or remote or both metro and R&R
Why don’t providers track outcomes?

• 64% of metropolitan providers and 65% of regional providers referred to lack of time and funds

• When tracking is done, it is usually informal
  • Informal tracking occurs more often in regional areas/small communities
Of FSk students who ARE tracked....

- 64% of regional CEPs (40% for metro Aust) said at least half of their FSk students go on to further study.
- 28% (44% for Rest of Aust) said a few do.
- But these percentages are based on small numbers (n=25 and 25). 😞
Still no hard data on pathways from FSk provided by CEPs to VET

How do we get it?
Adapting courses to different places

- 75% of regional CEPs and 83% of other providers adapt their courses if necessary
  - Respondents emphasized that courses are adapted to PEOPLE, not places
    - Could have different groups of people in the same places over time
Effects of FSk on social capital

- Yes, positive effects for **SOME** students
- Yes, positive effects for **MOST** students
- Yes, negative effects for **MOST** students
- No, have not seen any changes
- Don't know/can't tell if there have been any changes
- Other

- Metropolitan (n=50)
- Regional (includes remote or both metro and regional) (n=61)
We spoke to xx CEP providers, some in rural locations, some in metro

- Some chosen from responses to follow up from survey
- Some from contacts via ALA, CCA
- Aimed for a range of different types of areas
Approach

• All were asked the same questions:
  • Describe the area and population
  • Characteristics of FSk students
  • Physical facilities for delivering Fsk training
  • Delivery models (how they structure the training/teaching methods)
  • Goals, learning outcomes and student motivations
  • Impacts on social capital
  • What happens to the students after they complete?
Selected findings – the students

- Most respondents were in low SES areas with high unemployment rates, low levels of education and limited skills
- Ages range from teens to over 60s
- A range of reasons for doing the course
  - Some forced to be there due to Centrelink
  - Want to improve employment prospects
  - Need to improve LLN to get into vocational education
  - Want to socialize
Physical environments and facilities

- Often standard classroom or training rooms
- But also tried to make the space less like a school classroom
  - Bean bags, cafes, libraries, under trees
- Sometimes limited options
  - the worst room on campus allocated to FSk students (metro area)
  - FSk students not considered as important as students of other courses
  - denied access to computer rooms.
Delivery models

• Frequency of sessions
  • Mostly 2-3 days per week
  • Ranged from 1-5 days

• Duration of sessions
  • 3-5 hours
  • One-on-one support 1-2 hours

• Length of courses
  • Minimum of 10 weeks, maximum of 12 months
  • Depends on how many units students chose (eg LLN + Empl or one or the other).

• Flexibility of non-accredited courses compared with accredited
Almost all providers did some form of goal setting with their students

Outline of course content provided verbally at the beginning

Most providers conducted a pre-course interview or assessment about students preferred learning styles

**Goals, learning outcomes and student motivations**
Survey respondent comments

• “The learners' life outcomes improves in all areas of health and well-being, future potential study or work opportunities, increased social capital, increased confidence and feeling of safety and stress prevention or buffering…. We are located in a very low socioeconomic area of a regional town and the people that come into our organisation would not go to a educational centre like an RTO or TAFE.”

• “There is currently not enough awareness of how beneficial this training can be to promoting positive outcomes and ensuring completion of further study.”

• “Funded LLN has resolved to be 100% Human Capital based rather than Social Capital based. This makes it difficult for LLN to concentrate on anything other than Employability. We align more closely with … the tangible but immeasurable changes that Governments are not interested in.”
“In a small rural, remote community, the large RTO (TAFE) don't want to work with us. They don't see us as being a feeder to their courses once we have helped students gain or solidify skills.”

“LLN practitioners will soon be extinct. Many providers are slowly reducing their staff numbers and LLN specialists are the first to go from our organisation. X employs people with Cert. IVs in Health and Fitness to teach LLN rather than qualified and experienced professional LLN teachers. Other providers, having to compete with X, are now following suit to reduce costs.”

“While any of [ESL students] are looking for work in the future, many of them desire to learn English that will allow them to mix in their community and develop relationships. FSK courses can make this difficult at times.”

Students will learn if the subject is linked/relatable to a students life or interest, small group learning, practical based and the student feels safe in their learning environment which community education providers and LLN/employ-ability courses are designed to do...
“[The ACE/community colleges sector] works with the most disadvantaged which creates tension between compliance and social capital approaches to addressing LLN.”

“Other orgs will not refer in the first instance because we are unable to offer a full qualification as part of the funding received ....This means students can only do the 'gap filler' modules that will only count as RPL for future courses elsewhere. ...we would prefer that clients are able to stay the course to gain a full qualification and have a better opportunity to engage in the local community and increase their social skills.”
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