

VET Networked for Quality

A description of a selection of VET networks and how they contribute to building and promoting good practice in teaching, learning and assessment

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1. Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe a selection of vocational education and training (VET) networks and how they contribute to building and promoting good practice in teaching, learning and assessment.

Themes

The title of the paper, 'VET Networked for Quality', continues a theme that emerged from an earlier paper by the researchers for Research Activity 3, 'Quality a critical issue in teaching, learning and assessment – a three country comparison'. The 'quality' paper found that policy makers in Australia, England and Scotland are focused on ensuring the quality of VET. To support quality VET provision, policy makers are using a range of strategies such as fostering innovation and supporting professional development.

A second theme in this paper is that, to build relationships and enhance practice, where possible VET practitioners take advantage of such quality strategies, for instance by participating in national staff development programs that fund networks. These programs include national initiatives such as Reframing the Future and LearnScope and various staff development programs within States and Territories. VET practitioners have also developed networks regardless of whether external funding is available, demonstrating their commitment to improving their own practice and that of their VET colleagues. VET practitioners have similarly formed networks to collaborate with industry, to improve understanding and cooperation between the different parties.

Methodology

The researchers conducted a scan of the range of networks that currently exist within VET, based on reports and discussions with VET stakeholders. As there are so many networks, we selected twenty that have either been in existence for some years or have featured in VET research reports or are funded by national staff development programs.

This paper is not an attempt to list all the networks in VET. We believe that the selection of twenty networks described in this report captures a range of different types of networks in the sector. Another criterion we used to select networks cited in this report is their focus on teaching, learning and assessment. Additionally, we deliberately selected at least one network from each State and Territory as well as a number of networks that operate nationally.

Terminology

The terms network and networking are defined in the body of the report.

The term VET practitioner is used to describe all personnel involved in the delivery of VET, from teachers to administrators and managers and support staff.

The term 'practice' is taken to mean the ideas, styles, language, stories, documents, theories, rules, frameworks, models and principles that professionals use and share (Wenger et al. 2002).

Companion documents

The paper is designed to be read in conjunction with other products of research activity three, available from <<http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au>>. These products include:

- a literature review ‘Critical Issues’
- a discussion paper ‘Complexities and Opportunities’
- the paper on quality mentioned above, ‘Quality a critical issue in teaching, learning and assessment – a three country comparison’
- a set of fifteen case studies.

2. Definitions, features and types of networks

This section of the paper describes VET networks in terms of some elements of networking theory.

Key findings

Key findings in this section include the following:

- There is considerable value in forming networks in VET, both for the individuals involved and for the organisations. Networks can provide the individual with access to information and knowledge and are sometimes essential to the success of organisations in the contemporary business world.
- However, networks are complex and often require sophisticated facilitation and management. Many VET networks consist of multiple parties with diverse and challenging goals.
- Networks in VET are often open to any interested parties, with no barriers to participation, and enable the easy flow of information. Other VET networks are closed, in the sense of having restricted membership, with members expected to make significant contributions to the network's activities and knowledge base.
- Intermediaries in VET – that is, organisations other than registered training organisations – often perform a valuable function in facilitating networks that consist of many different stakeholder groups.
- Communities of practice are one form of network and are sometimes intense and short-term. Communities of practice are popular in VET as vehicles for addressing pressing issues such as a review of a Training Package or the implementation of equity principles.
- A range of networks in VET are long-lasting, demonstrating their value to the members and their importance to the sector.
- Networks are always needed in VET, to assist practitioners to improve their practice, to build relationships between the varied stakeholder groups and to enable the sector to remain responsive to changing client needs.

Definitions, value and complexity

Cohen and Prusak (2001) suggest that networks are a manifestation of 'the cooperative connections between people' (p.55) and they note that we all build individual networks by investing 'some significant proportion of our time, money, energy, and emotion in our connections with others' (p.58). Networks form for the following reason:

Because people need one another to reach common material, psychic and social goals. Mutual aid and generalised reciprocity are common to all functioning networks. (Cohen and Prusak 2001, p.58)

Cohen and Prusak (2001) believe that networks can deliver significant value to participants: "a network is one of the most powerful assets any individual can possess. It provides access to power, information, knowledge, and to other networks" (p.59). Networks are of value to organisations as well as to individuals:

Though network building mainly happens between individuals, it contributes to an organisation's social capital. Many of the benefits individuals derive from networks and communities – a sense of membership and purpose, recognition, learning and knowledge – can also pay huge benefits to the organisation. (Cohen and Prusak 2001, pp.60-61)

Theorists such as Adler and Kwon (in Lessor 2000, pp.97-98) argue that the norms, beliefs and rules that develop in networks create social capital, which is to be valued. Social capital is defined by Cohen and Prusak (2001) as a company's stock of human connections such as trust, personal networks and a sense of community.

Given these benefits of networks, it is not surprising that networks are increasingly valued in business as well as in society. Not only are networks valued in business, they are essential to the existence of an organisation, suggest Ford et al. (2003), who describe a business network as a number of nodes connected by threads:

In its most abstract form a network is a structure where a number of nodes are related to each other by specific threads. A business market can be seen as part of a network where the nodes are business units, such as producers, customers, service companies and suppliers of finance, knowledge and influence. The threads are the relationships between the companies. (p.18)

While inter-company networks are an increasingly common part of business, they are often complex: "The complexity of networks means that the company's interactions with others will always vary in different situations and over time" (Ford et al. 2003, p.33). The Northern Territory network described below is complex, involving cultural issues, safety issues, disparate stakeholder groups, three regions of the Territory and a review of a Training Package.

Figure 1: NT network focused on safety and cultural integrity

In 2005 CHARTTES Training Advisory Council in Darwin formed a network of 'Top End' assessors and trainers in Tourism (Guiding and Operations) for ongoing discussion around the need for ensuring consistency in training focusing on safety and cultural integrity of tourism operators in three regions of the NT: Darwin, Katherine and Kakadu.

This network brought together industry personnel and trainers and assessors, to share models of good practice around the existing package, for setting new benchmarks in cultural tourism and tour guiding, and for enhancing management and improving understanding between often disparate groups.

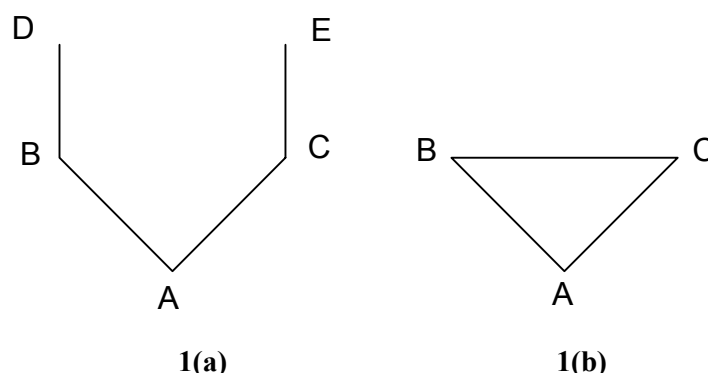
The network helped develop trust between providers and operators in the region and informed the review of the Tourism Training Package.

Facilitating such a complex network requires high-order facilitation skills and a deep knowledge of the national training system.

Openness and closure

Networks can range from open to closed networks, with the degree of openness or closure of the network dependent on the wishes and approaches of the members. The following diagram shows the two extremes of networks – with closure and without closure.

Diagram 1: Networks with and without closure (from Coleman, in Lesser 2000, p.27)



In diagram 1(a), a network without closure, or an open network, person A can impact on persons B and C; but B and C are not directly connected, with one linked to D and one to E. In this open network, there are a limited number of shared norms influencing behaviour. However, in diagram 1 (b), a network with closure, the three parties are all interlinked and can exert influence on each other to observe agreed norms of behaviour: obligations can be imposed (Coleman, in Lesser 2000, p.27). A VET network formed in 2005 and described below deliberately sought to function within both open and closed networks.

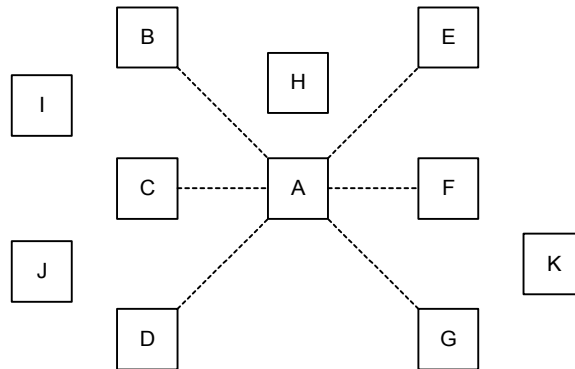
Figure 2: Use of open, closed and multiple networks by the ACE NSW VET Managers' Network

The purposes of the Adult and Community Education (ACE) NSW VET Managers' Network in 2005 were:

- to assist a group of around 25 VET managers from the ACE NSW sector to increase their knowledge and understanding of key issues in teaching, learning and assessment – in a closed network;
- to enable the VET managers to share their learning about teaching, learning and assessment across the network and across ACE NSW– in an open network;
- to enable the VET managers – through linking one network with others – to support the learning occurring in related networks in ACE NSW, including: the metropolitan and regional/rural Assessor Networks; the online validation network; the AQTF network focused on basic induction training; and the literacy network;
- to enable the VET managers to develop advanced skills and knowledge in managing the complexities of networks and in facilitating different types of networks in ACE NSW.

Adler and Kwon (in Lesser 2000) distinguish between those closed networks where there are direct or dense ties or connections between members and those open networks where the ties are weak. Closed or dense networks facilitate the emergence of shared norms and encourage trust among members while open networks may involve lower levels of trust (p.98). The following diagram is an attempt to describe a network where many of the ties between members are weak.

Diagram 2: An open network with weak ties between members (from Ford et al. 2003, p.160)



Adler and Kwon (in Lesser 2000, p.98) indicate that networks with weak ties between members may have significant value, allowing for the easy flow of information between members without the need for many shared norms. Mitchell (2004, p.13) suggests that this is important to note, because to form closed or dense networks may be difficult within many VET settings, where there are so many different stakeholders, from enterprises to training organisations, often separated by distance and by different work patterns.

There are benefits of open or loosely structured networks, where a closed network is inappropriate or not feasible. Adler and Kwon (in Lesser 2000) suggest that, in sparse or open networks, brokers or intermediaries who interact with many different community members can disseminate information of value to members without imposing extensive sociability or obligations on people (p.98). The potential activities of VET practitioners as brokers or intermediaries are described by Gientzotis (2003). Intermediaries are simply defined as VET organisations other than registered training organisations (RTOs).

Figure 3: Example of a VET network facilitated by an intermediary

The West Australian Arts Sport and Recreation Industry Training Council is an intermediary organisation that effectively managed a VET network in 2005, with funding from Reframing the Future.

This network brought together a cohort of stakeholders in order to identify an appropriate strategy to address skills shortages and lack of training for the equine industry. The community was comprised of industry representatives from the equine (non-racing, breeding), the outdoor recreation, sporting, racing sectors, together with relevant training providers.

Currently the industry is split along racing/non racing lines and there is little communication with the outdoor recreation, primary, and sport industries. Yet there is a strong area of growth in the equine industry that caters for recreational use of horses. There is no single training package that covers training for people wishing to be involved in the equine industry (unless in a breeding OR racing aspect). “

The equine industry is currently covered by five training packages plus an accredited course, as follows: Sport Industry Training Package-Equestrian; Rural Production Training Package-Breeding; Animal Care and Management Training Package-Vetinary and Animal Care; Non Training Package-Certificate III in Farriery; Outdoor Recreation Training Package-Trail Riding; Racing Training Package-Thoroughbred and Standard Bred Racing.

This raft of Training Packages is complex to understand, adding to the value of forming a network that seeks to demystify and explain the packages.

Industry training councils and the new Industry Skills Councils are prominent intermediaries in the VET sector, often hosting and supporting networks in a number of ways, as for instance the TDT Australia network described in Figure 5 below.

Networks and communities of practice

Networks and communities of practice are common in VET and need to be distinguished. Cohen and Prusak (2001, p.56) find that both networks and communities of practice are groups of people brought together by common interests, experiences, goals, or tasks; and both imply regular communication and bonds characterised by some degree of trust and altruism. However, Cohen and Prusak believe that networks are different to communities of practice in a number of ways: communities of practice are harder to organise, maintain and sustain; and are often intense, high-effort and short-term. Networks are simpler to organise, rely mostly on mutual needs and are often long-lasting (p.56). Networks are also different to communities of practice in other ways:

- communities of practice enforce norms but networks are often too diffuse to do so;
- communities of practice have a type of closed membership while networks are open;
- and communities of practice have a shared domain of knowledge while networks are less concentrated in their focus (Cohen and Prusak, 2001, p.56).

While networks are different to communities of practice, they are both of value to both the individual and organisations:

Though network building mainly happens between individuals, it contributes to an organisation's social capital. Many of the benefits individuals derive from networks and communities – a sense of membership and purpose, recognition, learning and knowledge – can also pay huge benefits to the organisation (Cohen and Prusak 2001, pp.60-61).

For the purposes of this paper, communities of practice and networks are viewed as being from the same family of relationship types.

Following is an example of a community of practice focused on developing members' capabilities specifically in relation to promoting the engineering trades in a regional setting.

Figure 4: Example of a community of practice in engineering, focused on members' capabilities

In 2005, the Limestone Coast Engineering Community of Practice was formed by the South East Education and Training Association Inc. in South Australia. Its members included both educational practitioners and industry representatives.

Its purpose was to develop members' capabilities and establish closer relationships between those involved in the delivery of the National Training Framework and industry stakeholders in the region. The project will ask "How do we deliver Vocational Education and Training in the engineering trades in order to meet the needs of the region?"

The community of practice focused discussion and learning on three areas:

- What are the training needs and issues for businesses requiring engineering trades people?
- What are the issues which impact on the take-up of engineering trades' training opportunities?
- What are the structures and methodologies which support people to engage in training for an engineering trade?

The precise nature of this network's questions suited the construction of a community of practice, which often form for a specific purpose and dissolve when the purposes is resolved.

Long-standing networks

A range of networks has always existed in VET, involving either training providers or industry, or both. These networks vary from those that predominantly consist of providers, say from the printing or the literacy fields, to those that are formed around, say, the learning and development staff from various enterprises. The existing VET networks also vary in their formality, size, structure, aims and focus.

An example of a long-standing VET network of providers is the TAFE horticulture network, which was first formed in the 1980s. Another example, this time from the enterprise sector, is

described in Figure 2 below.

Figure 5: Example of long-standing enterprise-based network in VET

An example of a long-standing VET network of learning and development practitioners is the National Corporate Learning and Development Managers Network in the transport and logistics industry, which was formed in 1999 and is now facilitated by TDT Australia.

The network consists of representatives from a wide range of enterprises involved in the industry, including TNT Express, Toll, Woolworths, P & O, Queensland Rail, Graincorp, Westbus, First Fleet, Patrick, Australia Post, Westgate Logistics, Defence Industries, Linfox, Qantas, State Transit Authority (NSW), Toll Stevedores, CSX, Hertz, Connex and Virgin Blue

Facilitator of this national network, Amanda Thomas from TDT Australia, explains that the network consists of “the senior L&D person with national responsibility for the function, including VET, for their organisation. Some of them are Enterprise RTO’s. They all offer Certificate III and higher level training.” She continues:

They all have active VET programs, some of which are approaching 10 years old. They also all use external RTO’s public and private on a needs basis – with varying degrees of success. Their interest is maximising the outcome for the business – that is, having a credible VET (often traineeship/New Apprenticeship) program that produces highly skilled trainees. Their frequent catch cry is that RTOs don’t understand their individual business, and, that the one size fits all training model doesn’t work for them.

The network members normally meet four times each year, with the location often rotating between Sydney and Melbourne. In between meetings, communication is normally by email. Membership is voluntary and free and no pressure or expectations are placed on members. In 2006, they plan to expand the options for attendance via the use of technology for participants in other states.

Attendance rates at the TDT network meetings are consistently high, indicating the value the members place on the network.

Need for more networks

Research (e.g. Mitchell and Young 2001; Mitchell and Wood 2001; Mitchell 2004; Callan and Ashworth 2004) indicates that many more networks and partnerships involving industry and training providers are required to more fully respond to the many challenges of implementing a national training system. These challenges include

ensuring that the training is demand-driven and client-focused and of an appropriate and consistent quality. The challenges also include the building of relationships with a variety of stakeholders, including providers, industry-based trainers and human resource personnel, industry clients, industry representative groups and professional associations. (Mitchell 2004, p.14)

To ensure the vitality, growth and quality of the VET sector, increased levels of networking are required.

3. How networks enhance teaching, learning and assessment

This section of the paper specifically highlights different ways that networks enhance teaching, learning and assessment in VET.

Key findings

Key findings in this section include the following:

- Some networks in VET focus on implementing new Training Packages. For instance, many networks currently address the new implementation of the new TAA04 Training and Assessment Training Package.
- Some networks address specific issues such as equity concerns, sustainability issues, employability skills, credit transfer, recognition of prior learning, and language, literacy and numeracy issues.
- Some networks bind together VET stakeholders from the one industry, for instance providers and enterprise personnel from the plumbing or engineering or hospitality or accounting industry.
- Some networks focus specifically on assessment, sharing assessment tools and strategies.
- Some networks focus on teaching and learning issues, enabling VET practitioners to increase their knowledge and skills. A common issue is how to support learning in the workplace.
- Some networks support collaboration between VET and industry, with the long-term goal of increasing the quality and volume of training.
- Some networks support collaboration between members of enterprise RTOs, enabling these RTOs to better implement the national training system.
- Some networks focus on improving flexible learning strategies, to improve providers' responsiveness to clients.
- Some networks focus on integrating technology into the delivery of VET, involving both e-business technology and practices and e-learning.
- Some networks focus on the learning needs of groups of learners such as Indigenous people or people with a disability.
- Implicitly and sometimes explicitly, all the networks described in this section aim to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in VET.

Some networks focus on new Training Packages

Some networks focus on new Training Packages, such as the TAA04 Training and Assessment Training Package, so that members can better understand and implement the packages. An example follows.

Figure 6: Example of a TAFE network focused on the TAA Training Package (from Mitchell, 10 Nov 2005)

A case could be made that the new training and assessment (TAA) Training Package is the most important training package in VET, given that the TAA Certificate IV will become the basic standard for trainers in the sector.

One group of VET practitioners that is thoroughly interrogating the new package consists of representatives from TAFE Institutes in NSW and Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory and the ACT. The group received funding in 2005 from the national staff development and change management program Reframing the Future to form a teaching and learning network. The network is convened by Tim Dein from TAFE NSW Business Arts & Information Technology Curriculum Centre (Sydney Institute), and facilitated by his colleagues Jennifer Harding and Nicola Pegum.

This network is worthwhile examining not just because of the issues it has identified in relation to implementing the Training Package, but also because the network provides a model for how to use national collaboration for innovation. Additionally, this TAA group is a reminder of the web of networks and relationships between practitioners in VET that add considerable value to the sector.

Dein explains the original intention of the network: “The network aims to provide a forum for discussion of recognition, delivery and assessment strategies for the new TAA training package. A core of trainers and assessors from TAFE providers across Australia will be linked in a national network.”

From the start, the network decided to link to other groups, says Dein: “We set out to link to other Reframing the Future networks that focus on the TAA training package.” These linkages ensure the network develops “a balanced set of strategies for the implementation of the package that can be applied across contexts, student groups and industry sectors,” says Dein. Other TAA networks have been contacted during the year for exchanges of information.

Some of the TAA Training Package issues identified by the above network are:

- How to develop simulated environments for candidates with no access in the workplace to training delivery situations
- Where to access learning materials and how to validate assessment tools and strategies
- How to blend face-to-face sessions with online activities such as online mentoring
- How to decide whether trainers need only some of the units, not the whole Certificate
- How to cater for mixed groups of internal RTO staff and external commercial clients
- How to integrate the TAA training package with other professional development for new staff. (Mitchell, 10 Nov 2005)

Described below is another national network that also focused on issues raised by the TAA Training Package, but had very different membership to the TAFE one discussed above.

Figure 7: Example of a national enterprise network focused on the TAA Training Package

In 2005 St John Ambulance Australia established a network of the St John trainers involved in delivering the new Training and Assessment Training Package. These TAA trainers were located in all states and territories.

As St John has over 2,100 first aid trainers, there are potentially significant training and assessment issues raised by the new package. St John is also implementing new programs from the start of 2006 which increase the need for more trainers with the new Certificate IV TAA qualification.

This a network enabled the TAA trainers to share knowledge about learning resources, teaching strategies and assessment approaches, thereby enhancing the quality of TAA delivery.

The above examples clearly demonstrate the value of networks in assisting with the implementation of new Training Packages.

Some networks address specific issues related to training

Some networks in VET address specific issue such as equity concerns, sustainability issues, employability skills, credit transfer, recognition of prior learning, or language, literacy or numeracy issues.

In the following example, a network that started within the one RTO expanded later to include interstate connections. The network began with staff at Challenger TAFE in Western Australia embedding sustainability principles in the delivery of Training Packages.

The definition of sustainability guiding the Challenger TAFE initiative is provided by the Western Australian Government, which defines sustainability as meeting the needs of current and future generations through the integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity.

Figure 8: National network focused on sustainability issues (from Mitchell, 13 October 2004)

When Principal Lecturer Christine Cooper commenced work on the sustainability issue within Challenger TAFE, she noted that staff were not fully conscious of the issues involved: "From my observations and discussions with teaching staff within the Institute, it appears that many teachers already embed sustainability principles into their Training Package delivery. It seems to be intuitive and 'common sense', but there is no record of what they do, when, or how they do it." So she set out to help staff to capture and document existing practices of Challenger TAFE teachers.

Cooper believes that it is vital that all staff have a thorough understanding of sustainability principles, existing research and projects, the current sustainability activities of the college and how teachers are currently addressing the issue within Training Package delivery. "We need to be all singing off the same song sheet" she said.

One of the many dynamic aspects of this case study on innovation is the way Cooper is effectively tapping into national networks. Cooper is using funding provided by the Reframing the Future program to link with other leading VET professionals across Australia. For example, she is involving in the Challenger TAFE initiative Linda Condon who manages the National Centre for Sustainability at Melbourne's Swinburne University of Technology.

Cooper's networking includes engaging with TAFE NSW specialist Jenny Kent who is leading an NCVET research project which aims to identify where and how concepts of sustainability could be built into vocational learning.

Chris Cooper is also interacting with other members of the long-standing network, the National Horticulture Providers Network and a new national network in the floristry field that commenced in 2004 and continues to function. This active networking by Cooper adds value to Challenger's innovation and helps to revitalize VET practice within her College.

The next network concentrated on issues around language, literacy and numeracy.

Figure 9: Network focused on language, literacy and numeracy – TAFE SA, Adelaide South

This 2005 network of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) practitioners and vocational trainers – across TAFE SA, RTOs and industry – shared research information and explored practical teaching and learning strategies for the integration of LLN with vocational training.

The network enabled participants to collectively identify critical issues in LLN teaching, learning and assessment and develop responses to learners' demands for broader learning domains.

For the learners, the integrated LLN and vocational training pedagogies enabled them to acquire skill sets that are not discipline-based, but are relevant to the multi-disciplinary knowledge required by the contemporary knowledge-based economy.

The participating organisations benefited from the skills development of staff and the high quality implementation of the national training system.

Networks are effective platforms for stakeholders to use to consider single issues such as sustainability or literacy issues.

Some networks bind together stakeholders in the one industry

On the surface, the VET sector is structured around government departments, industry groups, public and private providers, unions and professional associations, training packages and quality guidelines. However, leaders in the sector have recognised for some years that the sector is also underpinned by the goodwill that exists between the many VET stakeholders:

This recognition of the importance of goodwill is demonstrated by the national funding made available for an innovative program for VET communities of practice. Such communities are defined by theorists as groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. (Mitchell 19 October 2005)

Since 2001, the VET sector has seed-funded several hundred networks and communities of practice through the national staff development and change management program, Reframing the Future, now overseen by DEST. Other networks have been funded by LearnScope and state and territory programs. Research consistently shows that these networks and communities of practice are effective mechanisms for VET practitioners to improve their collaboration and networking with peers, industry and the community.

These networks often bind together VET practitioners from the one industry, for instance from the plumbing or engineering or hospitality or accounting industry. An example follows.

Figure 10: National plumbing community of practice (Mitchell, 19 October 2005)

A community of practice that received funding from Reframing the Future in 2004 to focus on training issues in the plumbing field continues to achieve benefits arising from members' collaboration. The community is chaired by Fred Baltetsch, Head of School, Building and Construction, Gordon Institute of TAFE in Victoria, and enables members from across Australia to link with other VET stakeholders.

The community of practice enabled the fledgling National Plumbing and Services Training Advisory Group to become established as a viable, ongoing group. The primary aim of the group is to improve the consistency and value of training for the plumbing industry.

Participants in the community include representatives of public and private providers, members of industry training advisory bodies, curriculum specialists and regulators of state plumbing laws. According to Baltetsch, "The community cross-links with a number of industry groups including Master Plumbers and the Mechanical Services Association of Australia."

In conjunction with the Plumbing Industry Commission of Victoria and DEST's predecessor ANTA, the community of practice managed the development of eighty three learning and assessment resources for the new plumbing and services training package. "This was a great outcome and all states and territories were involved in the initiative," says Baltetsch.

Such results were not automatic: "Before the initial meetings, people were very apprehensive and cautious about the sharing of resources", says Baltetsch. "But the members have worked hard to establish rapport and trust in each other and are now proactive in sharing any development that is currently happening in their state or territory. There have also been a number of friendships formed which have made people more relaxed and open in expressing their views."

Benefits have emerged for both the members of the community of practice and for the sector. "I have noticed the professional competence and the self-esteem of individuals improving," says Baltetsch. "And for the VET sector, a national plumbing network now exists which develops new training resources and prevents the duplication of resources."

"Above all, the group has contributed to the development of strong relationships between members from all States and Territory," says Baltetsch. In developing these strong relationships, the community of practice contributes to the development of social capital in VET, defined by one theorist as the wealth that exists because of an individual's relationships.

As demonstrated by the plumbing example, communities of practice provide a means for VET practitioners to create, share and apply their knowledge with other practitioners. In tapping into the rich veins of goodwill that exist between stakeholders in an industry, communities of practice are also part of the underlying foundations of the national training system.

The above case study indicates that communities of practice have the potential to achieve the following:

- Build trust and relationships
- Provide access to new knowledge

- Foster innovation
- Enhance professional practice
- Support the management of change
- Improve organisational productivity
- Increase social capital. (Mitchell, 19 Sept 2005)

Some networks are specifically focused on assessment

To ensure consistently high quality training, assessment is a high priority activity within Australian VET and it is no surprise that many networks focus solely on this area. One assessor network that has been in place for many years is described below.

Figure 11: Victorian Assessors Network

The Victorian Assessors Network conducted a two day workshop in 2005 with the following practical objectives:

- To produce a template for designing assessment tools
- To provide a professional development and learning experience for members through a community of practice
- To develop a set of assessment materials for two or more Units of competency from the TAA004 Training Package
- To create a set of “holistic” assessment tools including generic case studies for assessing two or more TAA004 units concurrently
- To validate the assessment tools and workshop process through Steering Group activity and a project participant review process.

An ANTA report, *Assessor Networks in Action* (2004), provides an overview of VET assessor networks and advice about starting up and maintaining a network.

Some networks focus specifically on teaching and learning issues

Networks are useful mechanisms for groups of VET practitioners interested in the quality and consistency of teaching across the sector. An example follows.

Figure 12: WA Department of Education and Training teaching and learning network

In 2005 the WA Department of Education and Training established a teaching and learning network to support professional development managers, coordinators and VET practitioners to implement the new TAFEWA Lecturers Qualifications Framework (TLQF). It focused on developing and implementing quality and consistency in teaching, learning and assessment strategies for the new Essential Skills Internship and Structured Mentoring Program. These programs were open to all new TAFEWA lecturers as of January 2005 as part of the TLQF.

The network reinforced collaborative arrangements that had already been established between the ten TAFEWA colleges led by the Department of Education and Training earlier in 2005. The network members shared models, processes, strategies and products to support consistent and quality delivery and assessment practice in relation to the TLQF. The work benefited all those involved in the implementation across all TAFEWA colleges.

The work of this network in 2005 will benefit the hundreds of new TAFEWA lecturers who will participate in the Essential Skills and Structured mentoring Program over the next four years.

One Tasmanian community of practice in 2005 focused on encouraging good practice in workplace learning.

Figure 13: Tasmanian community of practice on workplace learning

The aim of the Enterprise Learning community of practice established by the Institute of TAFE Tasmania was to provide networking opportunities for ‘champions’ of workplace learning to discuss, share and reflect on good practice with their peers, and to increase individual and group capabilities.

The community of practice sought to achieve the following:

- address national concerns regarding ineffective industry partnerships
- strategically influence the role of workplace learning in TAFE Tasmania
- support training package implementation
- promote workplace learning as a model to industry
- reinforce our strong and lasting industry partnerships
- ensure relevance, effectiveness and quality in workplace assessment and delivery
- connect our diverse delivery teams and regions
- to be a conduit to delivery team members, industry, management.

When facilitated effectively, networks such as the Tasmanian one are able to provide a non-threatening environment for VET practitioners to exchange ideas about and approaches to teaching and learner support.

Some networks support industry-VET collaboration

Some networks support collaboration between VET and industry, with the long-term goals of increasing both the quality and volume of training. The Australian Council of Private Education and Training (ACPET) is a significant provider association that facilitates industry-provider collaboration to meet these goals, as below.

Figure 14: ACPET hospitality industry network in Queensland

ACPET formed a network in 2005 in Queensland to create a critical team of hospitality industry associations – including the Queensland Hoteliers Association and the Restaurant and Caterers Association – to partner with educators and trainers in a spirit of collaboration in respect of common challenges. The network aimed to improve improving the effectiveness, timing, relevance and efficacy of training and professional development opportunities within the Queensland hospitality industry.

The network engaged education and training providers, industry representatives, schools and other stakeholder professionals, such as the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, through a series of targeted professional development workshops and related activities and identified processes that will ensure training is targeting skills shortage areas. The network also identified methodologies to enhance hospitality as a career choice.

The network enabled information sharing that nurtures good practice and identified current and emerging issues, encouraged professional development and formulated policies that offer improvement opportunities and collegiate activities.

Such industry-provider networks are potentially powerful mechanisms for enhancing VET practice.

Some networks support enterprise RTOs to optimise the benefits of VET

Enterprises with RTOs often find it valuable for their VET managers to collaborate with their peers in other enterprises. One such example is described below.

Figure 15: Enterprise RTO network (from Mitchell, 23 November 2005)

Formed in 2003, Enterprise Registered Training Organisation Forum (ERTOF) consists of members from over a dozen leading Australian companies including the main airline, two of the top four banks, two of the main retailers and one of the largest telecommunications companies.

The chair of ERTOF, Chris Butler, RTO Manager at Insurance Australia Group (IAG) Ltd, explains that the vision of ERTOF is “to influence the VET system in order to advance the focus on learning within industry”. The purpose of ERTOF is to “share practices, advocate on behalf of industry, influence policy decisions impacting on industry and establish and maintain the value of VET within industry”, says Butler.

Butler can only see benefits for all parties if ERTOF participates as a constructive player within the VET sector. However, ERTOF occupies an interesting position within VET: its members are supportive of the national training system, but “our organisations sometimes are uncomfortable with aspects of the national system,” says Butler.

The volume of paperwork is one inefficient aspect of the national system and the variation between states in the administration of the national system is burdensome for enterprises with branches around the country. Butler is specifically concerned that some enterprise RTOs are audited numerous times and “the different audit reports suggest inconsistencies between auditors”.

IAG’s Butler believes that the experiences of members such as Westpac show that ERTOF has knowledge about the implementation of the national training system in industry that is of value not just to VET policy makers but also to other enterprises. “We now need to articulate what we can offer other enterprises engaged in training and what we can offer policy makers,” says Butler.

A member of ERTOF, Robyn Herdman from Westpac, believes that the benefits of national training system to large enterprises include the following:

- Fits well with the ‘employer of choice’ strategy
- Provides portable qualifications
- Brings individuals external recognition for their skills
- Increases employees’ understanding of job roles
- Enables employees to provide improved customer service
- Creates an industry standard for training. (Mitchell, November 2005)

The ERTOF network provides a mechanism for enterprise RTOs to seek such important benefits.

Some networks focus on improving flexible delivery

Some networks focus on using blended or mixed modes of delivery and assessment strategies, such as the Central West TAFE College in Western Australia.

Figure 16: Example of a network focused on flexible delivery – Central West TAFE

In 2005 Central West TAFE formed a network of appropriate stakeholders from remote, rural and regional locations to assist in the unpacking of the new Information Technology Training Package (ICA04), with a focus on blended or mixed mode of delivery and flexible assessment practices.

A variety of stakeholders engaged in professional development to allow the sharing of a combination of personal experience and expert knowledge – in the region and industry – and to ensure appropriate usage of technology and other delivery methodologies for delivery and assessment, resulting in consistent quality and a client focused approach.

Underpinning the network’s professional development, communications and relationship building focus was the development of clustering arrangements, holistic assessments, compliant evidence guides, assessment plans and tools to support the learning environment and allow it to become more open and inclusive.

Flexible delivery is not only desirable but sometimes essential in regional areas, where students are separated by large distances. The Central West College network tapped into the stakeholder groups to design flexible delivery that suited its region and a new Training Package.

Some networks focus on integrating the use of technology

LearnScope has funded numerous networks since 1998 to integrate technology into the delivery of VET. One such example is described below.

Figure 17: ACE NSW Innovative Business Strategies Group

The purposes of the group, which received funding support from LearnScope in 2005, was:

- to assist a core network of around 20 senior ACE sector personnel to develop improved business models and processes, particularly with regard to e-business and e-learning;
- to support the aims of the BACE documents ‘Utilising Technology for the Future’- that is, that e-learning and e-business services in ACE be developed – and ‘Collaborate and Connect – A Strategy for E-business and E-learning in Adult and Community Education in NSW’;
- to ensure that those Group members implementing E-sced will benefit from the Group’s investigations of related processes and technologies, including the examination of databases and learning management systems;
- to provide information and knowledge for the ACE NSW sector in relation to e-business and e-learning issues and opportunities.

The above network examined e-business strategies as well as e-learning approaches.

Some networks focus on the learning needs of groups of learners

Some networks examine the learning needs of Indigenous learners, such as this one in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

Figure 18: Pilbara TAFE assessor network

In 2005, with funding from Reframing the Future, Pilbara TAFE formed a network of VET practitioners involved in the training and assessment of Indigenous persons in remote North West Western Australia.

The network members used an action learning model to share knowledge and resources to enhance the quality and customisation of teaching, learning and assessment processes to meet the cultural learning needs of Indigenous students within the local context.

The networked aimed to develop a ‘whole-of-life’ training and assessment kit to better equip new VET practitioners and subsequently improve learning outcomes for Indigenous students.

Another Western Australian network examined the needs of people with a disability.

Figure 19: Swan TAFE network for people with disabilities in the laundry industry

This 2005 project focused on developing industry and employer networks within the laundry industry to provide training opportunities for people with disabilities. It has been identified that there is a shortage of skilled pressers within the laundry industry. Through a very successful person, with a disability, completing the Certificate II in Dry Cleaning Operations and Certificate II in Laundry Operations, it was identified that these are possible employment pathways for people with disabilities. It was thought that traineeships in this field may also suit school based trainees.

This network aimed to:

- Further establish industry networks
- Establish school based networks for people with disabilities
- Identify appropriate flexible delivery options for traineeships to meet the needs of people with disabilities and industry
- Promote laundry operation traineeships to people with disabilities.

The Queensland network described below focused on the needs of disengaged youth.

Figure 20: Logan Institute network for disengaged youth

The goal for this 2005 project was to establish an innovative and effective teaching and learning network

for practitioners who are delivering learning programs in Brisbane South for young people who are disengaging or have disengaged from school and are not in any training or work.

It was recognised that encouraging innovation and a high level of teaching expertise is critically important in the success of programs designed to re-engage young people who have been unable to connect meaningfully with other learning programs or employment.

The network addressed the professional development needs of practitioners working with this group of students who often have substantial and complex personal, social and family issues.

Potentially, networks are powerful means for practitioners to develop mechanisms for assisting specific learner groups.

Theme: networks support quality

One of the themes in this paper and strongly demonstrated in this section are that networks support the achievement of quality teaching, learning and assessment in VET. Networks facilitate the exchange of information, ideas, techniques, approaches and tools between VET practitioners. Networks also provide a mechanism for providers to interact with and obtain feedback from their enterprise clients. In a variety of ways, networks enhance the quality of VET provision.

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