What works where you are?

The implementation of training packages in rural Australia

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The implementation of training packages in rural Australia

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Acknowledgements

Key messages

✧ Training packages have been extensively implemented in the rural communities of Ainsworth, Baldwin, Colton, Duncan and Ellis. Providers of vocational education and training (VET) servicing these rural communities were constantly challenged by 'thin' markets—or markets characterised by low activity and thus lacking depth or volume—and the small numbers engaging in training. Funding for training provision and the range of training on offer were consequently limited.

✧ Some policies and regulations governing funding and the delivery of training were seen by rural providers as working against their efforts to supply innovative solutions to meet the training needs of their communities. They would welcome some flexibility in the application of policy and regulations together with differential funding formulas.

✧ There was evidence of extensive collaboration in the provision of training between stakeholders in rural communities. Networking and partnerships have allowed resource and information sharing, avoidance of unproductive duplication of effort, and positive outcomes for providers, learners, enterprises and the communities.

✧ While competition policy has engendered a healthy training market, collaboration in rural communities is a sensible strategy for delivering effective vocational education and training. Any policies and incentives that support collaboration will assist in the broadening of training possibilities in non-metropolitan Australia.

Executive summary

It has been widely reported in recent years that Australia's regional and rural communities have extensive needs for skill development (Falk & Golding 1999; Kilpatrick & Bell 1999; Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia 2000). Changes wrought by globalisation and national policy and regulatory imperatives are forcing social and economic transformation in non-metropolitan Australia. Vocational education and training (VET) can assist these communities to develop the necessary skills to enable them to survive and to prosper in these changed environments.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the implementation of training packages in rural areas and the ways in which providers, community and industry stakeholders interact to achieve positive training outcomes. Stakeholders include training providers (public, private, VET in Schools and adult and community education [ACE]); New Apprenticeship Centres and group training companies; enterprises and industry representatives; government agencies; community organisations and learners.

The research looked at the strategies being employed in rural communities to ensure effective delivery of vocational education and training, particularly in situations where access to training infrastructure or to a diversity of workplaces and work experiences is limited.

Information was gleaned through a review of literature and websites relating to vocational education and training in rural Australia and training package implementation, as well as through focus group interviews with key stakeholders in five rural communities. To establish a general picture of relationships between key stakeholders in the communities, a simple network-mapping process was also undertaken.

Rural communities were defined as being not metropolitan; not major regional centres; not remote; and having a population within town boundaries of less than 10 000. Those selected were rural agricultural communities in far-north Queensland, central-west New South Wales, north-west Victoria and south-east South Australia, together with a regional town in south-east New South Wales.

Each of the communities in this study was unique. Their geographical setting, their socio-economic standing and their own, individual needs set them apart. Some had high unemployment, particularly for young people, but others were more fortunate in that the young were not forced to move out of the area seeking work. Some areas offered full-time permanent work, while others had a predominately casual workforce.

The major drivers of training in the communities examined were the same as those that influence training activity in regional and metropolitan Australia. National training policy, industry skill requirements as well as state government initiatives played a paramount role in determining what and how training was delivered. Considerable influence was also brought to bear by the market, which dictates the focus, direction and form that training is to take.

At the local level, rural industries, local government, small business and community groups also played a role in determining skill needs and, as a consequence, local training needs.

Within the five rural communities included in the study, there was a huge diversity of training going on. It included a range of VET qualifications and the delivery of over 30 training packages. Other accredited training, enterprise-specific training and non-accredited short courses such as

pre-employment, adult basic education, and training to support change in enterprises were also in evidence. Most training in each community was directed at supporting primary or local industry and community small business. New Apprenticeships were strong in all of the communities as were VET in Schools programs, school-based apprenticeships and adult and community education programs.

Despite the extensiveness of training package implementation, this research found that the qualifications on offer to rural learners in their own communities tended to be limited to Certificate I to Certificate IV. If learners wished to pursue training programs beyond Certificate IV, they engaged in training online or pursued their learning goals by leaving their community to access training in a larger regional centre. This could have a negative impact on both the social and business make-up of their communities.

Each of the communities examined in this research had its own particular advantages and disadvantages when it came to the implementation of training packages and other training. The literature on vocational education and training in rural and remote communities identifies a series of barriers that impact upon effective training delivery. The focus group participants in each of the rural communities included in this study confirmed many of these and elaborated on the complexities of implementing training packages and other training in their environments.

The following complicating factors were seen to be influential in training delivery in rural communities:

✧ Smaller numbers in training meant that, generally, the finances, resources and infrastructure for supporting such delivery were correspondingly limited.

✧ Isolation created particular problems in terms of accessing training and finding the qualified teaching staff to provide training. Lack of public transport was a major factor in lack of access.

✧ The impact of outside training providers was controversial. While their value was acknowledged for the expertise and facilities that they could bring to the community, they were not seen to have the community's best interests at heart, due to their lack of one-on-one interaction and failure to generally follow-up.

✧ 'Thin' markets—or markets characterised by low activity and thus lacking depth or volume— meant a lack of diversity in training programs able to be offered, with funding being the main barrier to the provision of a broader range of programs.

✧ Access to relevant workplaces was problematic, not only from the viewpoint of finding places, but also because of the problem of public liability and the high and increasing cost of insurance.

✧ Coordination, promotion and marketing of training packages across all businesses and education and training sectors within rural communities is not sufficiently effective.

Informants described the strategies they were putting in place to ensure that they were meeting the needs of their clients and their communities. They acknowledged a need to be highly flexible in the way they deliver training, so as not to further disadvantage particular rural learners. Thus, much of their training was being tailored and targeted to meet the needs of specific groups. Further, many of the training providers working in these communities had made a commitment to providing support services for those learners most in need. The provision of training that was timely, relevant and cost effective was a concern for respondents across the five communities.

A number of providers found ways of addressing the particular challenges that their learners face, chief among which is their geographic isolation. They did this by offering training in flexible modes, by attempting to solve transport difficulties, and by taking training to where the learners were located.

However, a frustration commonly expressed by training providers, industry and community representatives and employers related to the bureaucratic rules and regulations, which they felt often prevented them from being as flexible as they considered they needed to be to better serve their clients. Some participants commented that these rules and regulations impacted more forcibly on

rural training providers and employers than on their city counterparts, simply because of the tyranny of distance and the inherent costs associated with their geographic isolation.

A number of participants in the study emphasised that, although there may be a perception that rural communities are scattered and not cohesive they, in fact, see themselves as 'close'. This strong sense of cohesion indicated that the members of these communities can be supportive and responsive to each other. By its very nature, vocational education and training in rural communities holds considerable potential for cooperation, collaboration and the sharing of resources, ideas and learners.

Whilst some training providers in this study expressed concerns about competition and the protection of their competitive edge, there was extensive evidence of strong networks, formal and informal partnerships and resource sharing within these communities. Despite the challenges of the current training market, key stakeholders in rural communities were becoming more trusting and willing to enter into collaborative activities in the interests of their learners and their communities. Gradually, public and private training providers were recognising that they needed to make pragmatic decisions about market share. They have come to the understanding that it makes little sense for all providers to be delivering similar training programs in the same location. It also made no sense for those with limited capabilities in specialised training areas to compete with those who have expertise. Instead, they are choosing to work together.

An outcome of this collaborative activity is that stakeholders in training had a strong sense that they can influence decisions about what training should occur in their rural community. Evidence from previous research highlights the importance of local ownership and local input, a factor verified by the participants involved in this study.

Cooperative efforts between stakeholders can pay great dividends for rural communities and, as such, much more consideration may need to be given to policies, incentives and other strategies that will encourage and extend such collaborative activities.

Context

Research purpose

The purpose of this research was to investigate the implementation of training packages in rural areas and the ways in which providers, community and industry stakeholders interact to achieve positive training outcomes.

A further goal was to determine the strategies being employed to ensure effective delivery of vocational education and training (VET), particularly in situations where access to training infrastructure or to a diversity of workplaces and work experiences may be limited.

The project aimed to report on:

✧ the respective roles of community enterprises, VET providers and group training schemes in the delivery of training

✧ the extent or potential of partnerships, networking and resource sharing to enhance the capacity to deliver vocational education and training in rural areas

✧ the availability of, and access to, relevant infrastructure, workplaces and work experiences to support VET delivery in rural areas

✧ any apparent disparities between the stated objectives of training packages and local and learner needs.

Policy and practice issues

In *A bridge to the future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training, 1998–2003* (Australian National Training Authority 1998), it was proposed that training packages would not only enable people to develop the skills required by enterprises and industries, they would also allow training providers to more effectively meet changing skill needs.

Rural communities have extensive skill needs, which have been generated by global and local imperatives for change. As Kilpatrick and Bell observed, they 'need to be adaptable and flexible in order to meet the challenges of globalisation, low commodity prices, changing customer tastes and the emerging issues of good practice in land and water management' (Kilpatrick & Bell 1999, p.2). Vocational education and training has a critical role in the development of these skills, on which the economic and social survival of these communities may well depend.

But rural communities have also been identified as being potentially disadvantaged. Thin markets, together with geographical isolation, combine to leave rural learners with fewer choices of training programs and limited access to institutional or work-based training. User choice and the encouragement of a 'market' paradigm by government have given rise to a broad range of training providers, even in rural communities. However, it has also militated against comprehensive and strategic planning to address local training needs. To date, research undertaken by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (CRLRA) and others indicate that to better meet these needs, training provision in rural communities must involve local input and the development of partnerships between the key stakeholders (see appendix 1 in the online support document, at

<http://www.ncver.edu.au>). These stakeholders include governments, employers, industry, the community, training brokers, registered training providers and learners.

Issues identified in the literature

Significant studies have examined the impact of globalisation and national policy imperatives on non-metropolitan Australia (see appendix 1 in the online support document, at <http://www.ncver. edu.au>). Research has identified the need for regional communities to adjust to the new circumstances they are facing—shrinking rural economies, high youth unemployment and a drift to the city by the rural disenchanted. Research has also established a clear role for vocational education and training to support rural communities by providing skill development and strategies for managing change.

It is recognised that training packages have considerable potential to meet the training needs of rural communities, as do New Apprenticeships and user choice. However, because of the nature of rural communities, and some of the policies and regulations governing vocational education and training, quality training provision is seen by some researchers as not always possible.

The literature identified a number of factors which impact upon how training is provided in rural communities. These include: thin markets (which result in lower enrolment numbers, lower levels of funding and reduced program offerings); geographic isolation (which is often compounded by inadequate public transport and telecommunications); and limited workplaces (which restrict work placements, workplace experiences and opportunities for assessment).

Other factors seen to be influencing the quality of training provision relate to the training providers servicing these areas. 'Outsiders' were presented in a number of studies as sometimes inhibiting positive training outcomes. The literature suggested that training providers from beyond the local community are often seen as lacking necessary local knowledge or the commitment to meeting community VET needs. Further, the open training market is portrayed as having generated sometimes unhealthy competition between various providers who are working in the region.

However, throughout the literature there was clear evidence of cooperative training activity occurring between training providers and employers, governments, schools, group training companies and other key stakeholders in these communities. There are case studies of networking, resource sharing, information sharing, formal and informal partnerships and strategies to avoid unnecessary duplication of training effort. Researchers have identified an increasing maturity in the relationships between training providers where competition was being replaced by collaboration.

Research questions

The research questions addressed by this study included:

◇ What approaches have been implemented by training providers to deliver training package qualifications in rural communities?

◇ What are the relative roles and responsibilities of the key stakeholders in the delivery of training?

◇ How do the training providers, enterprises, group training schemes, community organisations and other stakeholders work together to enhance the capacity to deliver training to learners in rural areas?

◇ What strategies facilitate access to relevant infrastructure, workplaces and work experiences for learners undertaking training package qualifications in rural settings?

◇ What issues or complexities do providers face in addressing the requirements of training packages and local needs?

Methodology

Design of research

The information in this qualitative study was sourced, firstly, from an initial review of literature and websites relating to vocational education and training in rural Australia and training package implementation. The second and major source of information was gained through focus group interviews with key stakeholders in five rural communities. Part of this information gathering included conducting a network mapping exercise in which focus group participants identified and described their linkages and partnerships within the VET sector. The resultant network diagrams included their determination of the relative strengths of each relationship (Golding 2002). (Further details of the methodology can be found in appendices 2–5 in the online support document, at <http://www.ncver.edu.au>).

A project reference group with expertise in the delivery of training packages in rural Australia supported the project and provided valuable insights and suggestions about the shape and content of the study.

Sample details

Rural communities were defined as being not metropolitan; not major regional centres; not remote; and having a population within town boundaries of less than 10 000. To determine this, the Australian Classification of Local Governments (ACLG) criteria were applied (National Office of Local Government 2000). Four of the five communities in this study are categorised as 'rural agricultural very large'. This means that their local government area has a population of less than 20 000 and that the population density is less than 30 persons per square kilometre. The fifth community is classified as a small regional town. In all instances, the rural communities have populations within town boundaries of less than 10 000 people.

The selection of the *rural* communities to be included in this study was made with regard for the considerable amount of research that has been undertaken looking at vocational education and training in *regional* areas.

Those selected were rural agricultural communities in far-north Queensland, central-west New South Wales, north-west Victoria, south-east South Australia, and a regional town in south-east New South Wales.

Communities included in study

Community pseudonym	Population (approximately)	Location
Ainsworth	5800	Far-north Queensland
Baldwin	4044	South-east New South Wales
Colton	7130	South-east South Australia
Duncan	9800	Central-west New South Wales
Ellis	8500	North-west Victoria

To maintain confidentiality, no organisations or informants are named, and each rural community is identified in the report by a pseudonym. (A more detailed description of each community is included in the community profiles in appendix 7 in the online support document, at <http://www.ncver.edu.au>).

Potential participants in focus groups were identified through community websites and by a chain referral process which provided the contact details for key stakeholders involved in training package implementation and delivery within each rural community. All informants were actively involved or interested in vocational education and training in their rural communities or more broadly in their region or state. They included representatives from:

✧ technical and further education (TAFE) providers (for example apprenticeship and traineeship coordinators)

✧ private providers (for example apprenticeship and traineeship coordinators)

✧ senior secondary schools (for example VET in Schools coordinators/teachers)

✧ adult and community education providers (for example regional managers)

✧ local/regional government (for example shire council training officers, human resources managers and social planning officers)

✧ New Apprenticeship Centres

✧ group training companies

✧ community organisations (for example Aboriginal advisory groups)

✧ state government departments (for example state education department training officers)

✧ chambers of commerce/industry associations

✧ employers.

Analysis techniques

All focus group interviews were audio-taped, with supporting notes taken by hand. Tapes were transcribed and analysis was undertaken using a series of broad categories and codes. Cross-analysis of this material was then conducted to identify internal consistencies and independent variations within and across the rural communities studied.

Participant network maps were examined to determine the extent and relative strengths of individual organisational relationships, as well as the common relationships by stakeholder category across all focus groups. It should be noted that no attempt was made to identify discrepancies between any of the individual participants' responses.

Limitations of the study

The scope of this study was limited to five rural communities. As such, its findings can only be indicative of the broader experience of vocational education and training in rural communities across Australia. Limitations were imposed by the unwillingness and unavailability of some people to participate and, as a consequence, there were some instances of organisations involved in training not being represented in the focus groups and thus not providing their perspectives to the study. Where possible, individuals who were unable to attend focus groups were interviewed by telephone at a later date.

A snapshot of training in five rural communities

Scope of training activities

Although this study set out to explore the implementation of training packages in these communities, in every instance training packages were only a part of the total training effort. The discussion in focus groups could not be restricted merely to training package applications, as the participants invariably displayed a concern for, and focus on, their community's training needs and experiences as a whole. The training picture for these communities comprised everything from literacy and numeracy training through to higher education, and concerned itself with non-accredited as well as accredited training. Where the communities' needs were met by the provision of industry-specific, tailored short courses, even if those were non-accredited, then those needs took priority over any preference for accredited training.

The scope of training related to training package delivery was diverse and covered such generic packages as business services, financial services, retail, hospitality and tourism as well as such specific qualifications related to plastics, rubber and cable maintenance; nursing; meat processing; floristry; conservation and land management, as well as agriculture and horticulture. The training was very much market driven and was in response to the needs of local enterprises and those of the broader community; for example, programs for 'Youth at Risk', migrant and Indigenous groups, or long-term unemployed.

Even though whole qualifications were being delivered in many instances, training programs also included clusters of units of competency (for example, chemical users) and single units of competency (for example, chain-saw operation).

Much of the training was offered to address the specific needs of existing workers in enterprises and small business owners. In each community there was a strong focus on equipping farmers with the skills they needed to manage their diverse small businesses and those required to compete successfully in new global markets. For many it was the initial training to pursue a pathway into other qualifications.

For enterprises and farmers, there was also a good deal of training mandated by new legislation, such as that related to occupational health and safety. Participating in compulsory training has made many rural people much more aware of the range of training available in their community. It has also offered training providers the opportunity to market training packages and to explain the value of further training to individuals and organisations.

Raising the profile of training

Participants in the Duncan focus group discussed the industry nights that they run periodically, particularly when some new legislation has been passed that creates a new training need for local business and industry, like the introduction of the Responsible Gambling Act into the hospitality industry. They felt that, on these occasions, local industry often looked to the trainers as having knowledge and expertise about the new regulatory requirements. They also described running courses for business and industry where there is a need to demonstrate compliance with ISO (International Organization of Standardization) requirements. This training often alerted enterprises to further training possibilities.

In the main, young people remaining at secondary school were accessing training through VET in Schools programs, although there was a strong commitment to school-based apprenticeships in a number of the communities. However, one focus group noted that the complexity of setting up part-time traineeships was not encouraging schools to participate and that other related issues such as small numbers impacted on the delivery.

A number of the large enterprises that exist within these communities conducted a good deal of their own enterprise-specific training on site rather than using the services or sites of external training providers. In Ellis, a training provider from outside the region provided the training room and facilities at the worksite to ensure that the enterprise's needs were met. Others utilised local training providers as well as training services from outside the community and, sometimes, outside the state. In the current training market, enterprises and learners have access to a plethora of training options in each of these communities. The community profiles included in appendix 7 in the online support document at <http://www.ncver.edu.au> provide details of the extent of training provision and the players engaging in the training process.

Participants commented that they were using a range of delivery modes, including online, distance and face-to-face as well as mixed mode. Some rural learners, however, were travelling large distances for specific or technical skill training.

Stakeholders and drivers

In rural communities such as those investigated in this study, the stakeholders and drivers of VET activity were no more or less complicated than those which influence their urban counterparts. Issues such as workforce retention, competition, change management and the impacts of evolving technologies play their part in rural Australia just as they do elsewhere.

This study was conducted while Australia was experiencing its worst drought for ten years, and the far-reaching economic and social effects of that, in addition to its obvious environmental impact, undoubtedly contributed to the observations made by focus group participants. In rural communities the links between drought, international trade prices, business activity, the movement of young people out of rural communities and the demand for training are self-evident.

Government legislation and the needs of local businesses exerted the most powerful influences on what, where and how training was undertaken. For example, in recent years, the increased legislative and regulatory requirements for such areas within industry as welfare, occupational health and safety and risk management have increased the training needs of employers and created a demand for training. It is increasingly the case that even volunteer workers must receive accredited training and this impacts on rural training markets just as it does in the city. Likewise, some rural businesses and industries need to attain or maintain ISO or other quality assurance status in order to compete and to export, and these initiatives require a training component. Focus group participants observed that this compulsory training often made small businesses more aware of the broader benefits of training and resulted in requests to providers for other training as well.

By providing funding for certain types of vocational education and training, government also engineers the delivery of specific training activities; as it did, for example, in choosing to shift its focus from contracted training placements to traineeships.

Where a large business or industry was a major local employer, as was the case in Baldwin and Duncan, that organisation would typically generate a significant demand for training. Some of that demand would be met by the organisation itself, particularly where it has become an enterprise registered training organisation, but it typically also resulted in training partnerships with the local TAFE and/or private training providers. In addition, these large organisations had some highly specialised training needs (sometimes for only one employee) that could not reasonably be met by local provision, and that may require the employee to travel interstate or to undertake a distance education program.

It must also be acknowledged that an increase in training activity in rural communities can be prompted by a combination of several economic, social and political factors. One such example is provided below.

The evolution of a training culture within an enterprise

The training manager for a large agricultural enterprise described the history of training in his organisation. In previous years training for apprentices had been provided by TAFE in the local community, while other enterprise-specific short courses had been conducted internally or in the city. In the latter instance, workers were required to travel and stay for the period of training.

During an extended period of drought, the money which the organisation could access from various government and industry sources dried up, and the only funding that could be accessed was government funding attached to training. Using the incentives money available for New Apprenticeships and accredited training, the enterprise extended their training offerings and developed a comprehensive program of training for employees at all levels. The training manager worked closely with the local TAFE to develop enterprise-specific courses and this went a long way to develop a culture of training in the organisation which is now firmly embedded. In addition, the training manager noted that he was now working closely with the local secondary schools, New Apprenticeship Centres and private training providers. This had given him a much broader view of education and training and the particular needs of the local community.

Local councils in some rural areas were also significant employers and clients of training, particularly in the diverse areas of civil works. This was clearly evident in Ainsworth, Baldwin and Duncan. Two growth areas for rural training that were nominated by focus group participants were hospitality and aged care, and growing demand for services in these areas is expected to drive a demand for training as a consequence. Not having local trainers with the necessary skills to deliver such training then becomes the problem for these rural areas.

Delivery of VET in Schools programs was on the increase in the communities studied in this report, despite it being quite challenging to implement in communities with only limited numbers of workplaces available for student placements, and where it might be quite difficult to find secondary school teachers with the requisite skills. However, one focus group commented that almost regardless of which VET in Schools program students had participated in, they came later to vocational education and training with improved job-readiness skills and attitudes compared to those who had not participated in such programs and, for this reason alone, the VET in Schools program was judged a success in that community.

It was noted in several focus groups that only a minority of local secondary school graduates go on to university, and that this naturally entails them leaving the region. Not all of those who stay in the region are assured of full-time work, and some are further disadvantaged by not having access to private transport in areas where there is very little if any public transport provision. Although those who have difficulties with literacy and numeracy find training difficult, and indigenous unemployment was cited as an ongoing challenge by several focus groups, everywhere school-leavers were seen as an influential group whose needs and demands helped to shape local training provision.

It can be concluded from the observations of this study that the stakeholders and drivers of rural VET provision are no different from those in the cities, but there are certain challenges posed in rural locations, which will now be explored, marking each of them as unique.

Complexities in training delivery in rural communities

Introduction

Previous research into vocational education and training in regional and rural communities has highlighted a range of factors which act as significant barriers to the effective delivery of training packages and accredited training (Evans 2001; Kilpatrick & Bell 1998a, 1998b; Spierings 2001; TAFE Directors Australia 2000).

Similar concerns about delivering training were raised by a large number of focus group participants in this study. And while there were some variations in views across groups, mainly because of geographic, social and economic differences, these stakeholders related a number of common, interlinking themes as impediments to training in their communities. These included:

✧ thin markets

✧ geographical isolation

✧ difficulties in accessing skilled teachers and trainers

✧ perceived negative influence of 'outsiders'

✧ limited workplace opportunities

✧ lack of promotion or coordination of training within communities.

Each of these factors impacting upon training delivery in rural communities is now discussed in further detail.

Thin markets

One of the major factors that was identified as impinging on effective delivery of some training packages and accredited training in rural areas is the size of the demand. Unless there were sufficient numbers of apprentices or trainees to warrant it, funds were not available to provide training for just one or two participants. This is particularly true for large public training providers who were often providing training across numerous rural and regional communities.

Perhaps one of the strongest messages that came from all focus groups was the need for more funding to make the full implementation of training more viable. Participants saw a real need for more funds for facilities, learning resources and equipment so that more diverse training options could be offered to rural learners. They acknowledged metropolitan providers could, and probably would, argue for the same needs. However, they considered that rural communities' resource needs extended beyond those of their metropolitan counterparts, given the disadvantages that the communities faced.

The basic cost of a unit of training is higher away from major centres, and it is rare that training providers were able to achieve any economies of scale when delivering in rural communities. With no guarantees of continuous enrolments at reasonable levels, training providers were reluctant to maintain expensive programs. A private provider in Ainsworth noted:

> It comes down to dollars. If I can't run a course profitably, and we've got very low margins in our organisation, I don't bother. When people ring up and say, 'I want to do such and such' I refer them to TAFE or whoever. And I guess TAFE do the same.

Training providers were also making strategic decisions about where to place their training effort. This is best illustrated by a comment made by a TAFE apprenticeship and traineeship coordinator in Duncan:

> Local government is a large employer in our region. It is a large area for existing workers. Existing workers bring with them funding and money allows training. Because we haven't got a lot of other sources for funding, you have to look at where you're going to source the funds.

In addition, training providers were cognisant of the constant shifts in training demand and, given the small numbers within the community, the danger of saturation—that is, providing the course too often.

In all focus groups, there was general agreement that there was a lack of breadth of training offered in rural communities. This was attributed to a number of factors, all leading back to lack of funding as the crucial factor. This was particularly problematic where government requirements stipulated a standard of training that was ultimately beyond the resources of training providers to deliver.

It was suggested that some students have to reconsider their training options as few or no specialist fields were being offered in their rural community. As a consequence, some learners accepted a training pathway which is at a lower level or in a different field than others which might have better suited their interests and abilities. In other words, some learners took what was available rather than pursuing their educational goals elsewhere.

Limited opportunities meant that the majority of qualifications being gained by rural learners in these areas generally ranged from Certificate I to Certificate IV. To obtain higher-level qualifications, it was apparent that learners from these communities were more likely to engage in training online or to pursue their learning goals by leaving their community to access training in a larger regional centre. Their departure had a deleterious effect on the business and farming community, because employers do not have access to employees with the additional skills they need. There was also a commensurate impact upon the social make-up of these rural communities.

Further, in small communities such as these, the impacts of shifts in training supply and demand are felt more immediately and more keenly than similar shifts in metropolitan communities. A single enrolment can make the difference between a program's running and not running, and some providers resorted to strategies that their urban counterparts might never have to implement, such as the one who provided all the snacks and meals for their trainees so the students stayed in the program.

Geographical isolation

In the five focus groups, isolation was the most frequently mentioned detrimental influence upon vocational education and training in rural communities. Isolation impinged on learner accessibility to training sites, and on teachers and trainers travelling to undertake workplace training and assessment. It was also stated that the remoteness of some towns deterred potential teachers and trainers from locating to rural communities.

Some of the towns and surrounding regions included in this study were not serviced by public transport, and this had a considerable impact upon learners accessing education and training. For example, one adult and community education provider who had problems finding locations for delivering training thought the problem might be solved by accessing facilities in outlying towns. But without a public transport system it was not viable to utilise these facilities, so the training could not be offered.

Further, in many instances apprentices and trainees were on low incomes and could not really afford independent transport to attend a program of training. For one community, whose youth were leaving the area to find work, participants emphasised that those who did remain were those who could least afford the costs of travel for training. One community-based registered training organisation in Baldwin solved this problem by buying a small bus to take young people to training.

Even where there is transport, however, the costs may be prohibitive: '… for someone to go to a TAFE or any learning institute, it can cost up to $100 a week on the bus. Now no family or student can afford to do that'.

One solution to the problem of isolation and lack of transport had been the suggestion of block training in the nearest city. But this, too, imposed a financial burden upon learners. One New Apprenticeships Centre representative noted that, '… rural apprentices have to go to [the capital city] for eight weeks' training each year. They need accommodation and meals and they get $14 a day!'.

A significant concern within many rural communities was the safety aspect of the requirement to travel to undertake training.

The issue of safety

There is no rail link between one of the towns in this study and the capital city, so those apprentices who need to access training there must drive themselves to the city. Teenagers are certainly not the most experienced drivers and the trip, which can take about three hours, can be tiring at the end of a long day studying. The community is concerned that their apprentices are required to travel to the capital city to attend TAFE classes which are only offered on Fridays. So the apprentices have to drive on a dangerous road every Friday for three years. This community would prefer TAFE to offer training in two-week blocks.

Difficulties in accessing skilled teachers and trainers

Related to the complexities inherent in rural communities' isolation was the inability to attract skilled teachers and trainers to conduct training, especially to provide a diverse range of programs as well as those at the higher Australian Qualifications Framework levels. Focus group participants in both Duncan and Ellis made particular reference to the fact that attracting and retaining people to deliver training was an issue for their rural community. Issues included not being able to compete with the wages offered in metropolitan areas and keeping quality practitioners for any length of time before they are seeking to go elsewhere.

The nature of thin markets and limited demand for training also impacted significantly on the retention of teachers and trainers. It was suggested by one focus group participant that, unlike their counterparts in the cities:

> … in the country we reach saturation very quickly, that is, the demand is such that we may run a course only once or twice. Not only is this costly, it also makes it hard to keep good trainers gainfully employed. Often they move on.

Where teachers and trainers do stay within rural communities, their ongoing professional development was limited by their ability to make the time to access training programs, to travel the distance required, and to cover the cost of attending meetings which were generally conducted in regional centres or the capital city. In the Ainsworth focus group, there was general consensus that professional development was virtually non-existent for teachers in their rural community.

One Baldwin focus group participant had six training staff in the disability area who were keen to upgrade their skills. The group was too small, however, and the training could not be offered. The implications of not being able to access this professional development were seen to be critical as, under the Australian Quality Training Framework, trainers are required to be competent to deliver and assess such training.

'Outsiders'

With an open training market, it is possible for training providers who are registered to deliver within a state or across several states, to bid to conduct training anywhere within their scope. Inevitably, this brings some external training providers into rural communities. In all of the communities included in this study there were 'outsiders' delivering training alongside local providers. Participants in several of the focus groups pointed to the problematic aspects of this activity. Firstly, outsiders do not necessarily have a thorough understanding of the communities' cultures or training needs; secondly, they do not always have a strong commitment to the communities; and, lastly, they often underestimate the resources required to support effective rural training delivery. A participant in the Colton focus group provided their view on this issue.

> There are some organisations that are city based that look at the area and think that they couldn't possibly do their own training out there. So they come in, throw the whole system out, and then leave and feel that it's not really worth it. In that respect it's unsettling for training in general. We all seem quite settled with our own areas and work together and work in together. They see a potential market but then pull out before they are prepared to put too much into it.

Interestingly, both public and private training providers were designated as making these 'incursions' from the city, and both public and private training providers based in rural communities felt equally exasperated by those outsiders who were not fully committed to rural learners and their communities. The outside providers get caught out when the rural community calls on them for facilities and the provider realises that travel and resources are not available without extra cost. The outside providers then decide it is no longer viable to provide the service and withdraw, leaving learners without the promised training. Local trainers then feel that they are left 'picking up the pieces' in the interests of the community, but at great cost to their own businesses.

It was further noted that one city-based organisation had set up training in community and aged care services and that the quality of training delivery had been questionable. 'They didn't turn up on time, missed days, missed dates, lost staff assignments. This happened over two and a half years and it still hasn't improved.' Concerns were expressed by a number of participants across all five focus groups that this lack of professionalism left learners, employers and the community thinking that training generally was of little worth.

This aspect of outsiders coming in to rural communities is part of the competitive ethos developed by the National Training Framework that is often seen as unhelpful. It was suggested by a number of participants that competition tended to undermine providers' willingness to work together for the benefit of all. As one focus group acknowledged, there are real benefits to collaborating and sharing resources, but they are wary of sharing too much because of a fear of losing their commercial advantage.

Limited workplace opportunities

Finding suitable work placements for VET in Schools students, work-based experiences for those involved in accredited training and employers for apprentices and trainees is problematic in rural communities. As suggested by many focus group participants, this is largely because opportunities for employment can be quite limited in these areas. Some small enterprises may have a very narrow scope of operations which meant the necessary depth of workplace training was difficult for the employer to provide, as it was for training providers working across rural and regional areas. As the apprentice and trainee coordinator from Duncan suggested:

> A lot of the training covers a huge number of competencies and only a small number are available within that workplace. So how do you expose the employee to a lot of those different competencies? We can't afford within the TAFE structure to provide huge amounts of infrastructure in every tiny little place.

Where employers wanted to accommodate training, it was not always possible, as the requirements of the training were not as flexible as they would have liked. One participant illustrated the frustration felt in the following way:

> If you've got an employer who has got the opportunity to employ someone for 15 hours per week and they can't take them through an apprenticeship because they haven't got a permanent, full-time job, they have a part-time job, an extended traineeship, they put them through that. That is what they do. Then the State Training Authority walks in behind you, or walks in behind the apprenticeship centre, and says you should be doing an apprenticeship in commercial cookery. And the employer goes 'well I can't afford to employ someone for 38 hours a week to do that job. I have money to pay for 15 as long as it is subsidised'.

It was further noted that the regulations covering New Apprenticeships and user choice could be a barrier to successful implementation of structured training. The implication here was that although training providers and employers try to work out workable strategies to deliver training, government legislation sometimes makes it impossible. The new weightings for the Jobseeker classification and the rules covering existing workers and New Apprenticeships were seen by several stakeholders as restricting some of their training options. 'Over-training' was also raised by some as an impediment. Participants explained that traineeships were not available for those learners who already have a Certificate III[1]. As one New Apprenticeship Centre participant put it:

> These rules may make sense in the big cities, but out here it would be useful to have more flexibility. It is very hard to explain to employers and potential trainees that they can't just do what would suit them to do. They just see it as bureaucratic rules getting in the way of common sense.

Some focus groups discussed at length the issue of trying to match training to employment opportunities, acknowledging that many trainees became discouraged if there were little or no job opportunities to work towards. Further, they noted that training opportunities often lagged behind employment opportunities, giving the example of training in aged care. Although this was one of the fastest growing employment areas in several of these rural communities, a lack of appropriately skilled local trainers means that demand for training in this vocation is going unmet.

From the viewpoint of many of the VET in Schools participants, teachers delivering vocational education and training in schools struggle with a number of difficulties. In the first instance, school-based traineeships were hard to negotiate because they involved so many factors. For example, job opportunities were not always available in the right areas, and when the employment was available it became problematic arranging trainee release from school to the workplace. The rigidity of school timetables and the demands of some senior secondary curricula do not necessarily mesh with the requirements of the workplace.

The complexities associated with school-based apprenticeships have deterred some from engaging in the activity. A VET in Schools coordinator from Duncan gave voice to this view:

> Whilst few people would argue that they're a good idea, there are certainly a number of issues impacting on schools being able to successfully deliver them. The complexity of setting up part-time traineeships is not encouraging the school to participate. The number of hours that some students have to do in a relatively short period of time in conjunction with a standard Higher School Certificate is an uphill battle.

Further, schools in rural communities who were delivering Certificates I and II had difficulty locating sufficient work placements for their students. VET in Schools coordinators from two different secondary schools in Duncan also pointed out that if they sent students to TAFE for the

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[1] As of 1 July 2003 the New Apprenticeship eligibility criteria were relaxed to include any VET qualification that is more than seven years old will not disqualify employers from accessing New Apprenticeship subsidies.

off-job component of their training, the schools lost the equivalent staffing allocation. In other words, both TAFE and the secondary schools cannot be funded for the same training.

Added to this is the increasing cost of liability insurance when students enter the workplace. One participant suggested that insurance costs had brought into question the viability of continuing the program within her school. Other focus group participants saw the huge cost of liability insurance as an issue that impinged, not only on VET in Schools work placements, but on other accredited training as well.

The depth and wealth of the learning experience were also considered important aspects of training. The concerns about limited learning and workplace experiences have led many training providers and employers to consider and value various avenues of broadening the learning experiences. Job rotation and on-the-job training were considered valued strategies to broaden the experiences of trainees and on-the-job was viewed by at least one respondent as 'real life training'.

> With rural training, what we've done—we have found that real life has been very important and when we have been able to access actual farms to take people out onto, the outcomes have been very good.

The respondents acknowledged the important role that local businesses played in providing workplace experiences for learners. However, accessing appropriate workplaces to ensure both the breadth and depth of learning experiences was seen to be a significant problem by many of the participants across all focus groups.

Lack of promotion or coordination of training

One element consistently raised by focus group participants was that the promotion of vocational education and training was an important requirement in rural communities. In their view, there was a real lack of understanding about training packages and processes associated with New Apprenticeships, with many employers still preferring the old apprenticeship system. The diverse range of programs and initiatives as well as the heavy dependence on acronyms furthered the confusion.

These participants were all actively engaging in the promotion of training, and they recognised the importance of networking amongst themselves and others working in the region. Gaining and maintaining links with other small communities in the region was also seen as crucial.

Interestingly, on a number of occasions, participants who were working in different sectors of education and training openly admitted they did not know what other providers were doing. Adult and community education coordinators commented they were unaware of what programs were being offered by the private training providers in their area, and admitted they found the VET sector and its rules quite bewildering. A number of these were from organisations involved in the delivery of lower-level training package qualifications.

A common theme emerging from the focus groups was the need for the targeted promotion of the programs offered throughout the community—that is, to employers and providers—and also to the learners. Targeting training to specific groups was considered crucial to ensuring that training was relevant to the group and here the learners were more likely to see the benefits. Training needed to be targeted very specifically to the audience and then marketed accordingly.

Furthermore, a number of employer participants commented on the fact that it was also a problem knowing whom to go to for information or help, particularly for small business, which did not have the resources to allocate time and staff to follow up on information. It was suggested in one focus group that a central coordinator could be established in rural centres so that employers, registered training organisations and other providers could know who to access for information. The role

could also be utilised to promote and market the programs, both within the training providers and businesses and to the broader community. It was also suggested from one centre that a forum be held each year, made up of community and government representatives, with discussions on what training is required for the year.

These findings about the complexities of delivering training packages and other vocational programs largely confirm those of previous studies in the area.

Meeting local needs

Introduction

Kilpatrick and Bell observed that 'rural businesses and their communities need to be adaptable and flexible' in order to meet the many challenges that face them (Kilpatrick & Bell 1999, p.2). In fact, it is acknowledged that the breadth of skills required in these communities is extensive (Falk & Golding 1999). This puts a significant onus on all those delivering vocational education and training in rural, regional and remote communities. Training providers must give careful consideration to how they can best meet local learning needs.

In this study, focus group participants were asked to identify the strategies for delivering training that had worked best for them. Discussions centred on meeting learner needs, meeting employer and industry needs and, as a consequence, meeting community needs. The provision of timely, relevant and cost-effective training was a concern for participants across the communities.

Uppermost in the majority of participants' minds was the need for training to be flexible in terms of content, delivery modes and location. Without such flexibility the diverse needs of stakeholders cannot possibly be met. Providing recognition of prior learning, existing qualifications and skills was also cited as an extension of flexibility.

Strategies that work

Focus group participants identified a number of strategies they considered were working well for them and their communities.

One recurring strategy was that of identifying group needs and targeting the training to those needs. As suggested by one adult and community education provider in Ainsworth:

> Because we targeted people from the same group they were willing to come along. They thought the training was very relevant to them because we focussed directly on their needs. That training was very successful, whereas if you offered those workshops to the general community none would turn up.

Several participants, including private training providers and VET in Schools coordinators commented that bringing learners together from a number of employers or schools across the community made the training more cost effective and increased the richness of the learning experience for those involved. As training in rural regions quite often meant training was conducted in smaller groups, outcomes could be witnessed and resources could be shared.

Some training providers commented that going out to where their potential learners were located was a successful strategy:

> Going out to other communities always works well—being able to meet people's needs within their own community even if it's only 20 minutes away. People will come and take up the training more readily than they will if it's offered in a central area [where] they think it's not relevant to them.

A TAFE teacher in Ainsworth noted that they have employed a rotation system to overcome some of the problems associated with finding workplaces for learners undertaking training in the children's services area. This allowed 30–40 students to access each of the local centres in turn, thus giving all of them exposure to a range of learning opportunities. At the same time, these learners were encouraged to register as relief workers so they could gain additional experience in the field.

Another strategy that was seen to work effectively was support for learners, particularly those determined as having special needs, both in the workplace and off the job. This was seen to be particularly true of young trainees and apprentices. Providing frequent dialogue between the trainee, the provider and the enterprise mentors was seen as critical, especially in the early stages of the learning cycle. It was noted that from the employer's point of view, there needed to be a lot of support given to these young people in the first few months of their training, because 'that is a very unstable time for them and if the trainee is feeling insecure in a new environment and the support is not there, they will walk'.

Support often included providing life-skills training and access to numeracy and literacy assistance. Support strategies were also needed for Indigenous learners. One example is set out below.

Creating a safety net for indigenous learners

In Baldwin, one local private registered training organisation employs its own Indigenous Employment Officer to mentor their Indigenous trainees. This is despite the fact that there is a field officer employed by the Area Consultative Committee who has similar responsibilities. Rather than seeing this as a duplication of effort and resources, the training provider sees this as providing an essential 'safety net' for a group of 'at-risk' learners.

A Baldwin provider also suggested that some learners require short, sharp and compressed programs. Citing the example of a mature-age program, she indicated that with longer programs there tended to be a higher drop-out rate, and it was hard to keep learners motivated. These learners preferred courses they could complete in two to three days.

Many respondents saw the relationship between the training provider and the enterprise as a key factor in providing quality training to rural communities. Enterprise representatives considered training providers needed to be client focused and able to tailor training to suit enterprise needs and production schedules. In Ellis, a manufacturing enterprise considered that it was important to establish a 'longitudinal' relationship with their training provider. However, the enterprise representative also noted that enterprises should periodically review the service provision and be prepared to change providers if necessary.

> What we found was just stick to the one [registered training organisation], build the relationship, get them to understand our culture and our processes and look to them for guidance as to what we should be doing.

Industry representatives in Ellis emphasised the importance of maintaining strong, cooperative and visible links with training providers. They acknowledged that they were more inclined to give their support to those training providers who maintained contact and provided resources and assistance. Building the relationship was important; however, to maintain the collaboration it was clear that the training provider should be able to communicate with the employer, identify their needs and think creatively to come up with suitable arrangements to meet their training needs.

Indeed, across every focus group it was acknowledged that establishing open communication and clear links with key stakeholders interested in the delivery of vocational education and training within the community was the most effective strategy to ensure quality outcomes.

Collaborating in training

Introduction

The concept of collaboration is a consistent thread that runs through much of the literature on vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote Australia. The importance of training providers working closely with industry and other key stakeholders within the local community is emphasised by many authors (Balatti & Falk 2000; Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia 2001; Kilpatrick & Bell 1998b; Kilpatrick & Guenther 2003; Sidoti 2001a, 2001b).

Collaborations in rural communities are variously described as partnerships, community connections and networking but inevitably they are designed to achieve more effective training outcomes. Interactions may be underpinned by memoranda of understanding (formal partnerships), or they may simply be constructed on the basis of personal relationships and trust (loose collaborations).

Kilpatrick and Guenther (2003) have identified industry-provider, client-provider, community-provider, broker-client-provider, government-industry-provider and provider-provider partnerships regularly occurring in the sector.

This study sought to establish the existence of partnerships, networks and other training relationships in the target communities and to identify the barriers to such collaboration.

Mapping the networks

To gain a sense of what networks were operating within each rural community, focus group participants mapped all of the organisations with which they had a training-related connection and described the relative importance that each had for them.

It was evident from this mapping exercise that the public providers in this study developed relationships of varying strengths with many of the key stakeholders in their communities. They had particularly strong links with local government, major industry bodies and employers. At the same time, they had relatively strong relationships with the secondary schools in their own areas.

The private providers appeared to have much stronger links with New Apprenticeship Centres and other private providers than did most TAFE providers. Some private providers, particularly those involved in the provision of training in a narrow industry area such as disability support, connected most strongly with other organisations with a similar focus. For example, a private provider in this vocational area in Baldwin documented its strongest links as being with other providers who are delivering programs for mature workers, Indigenous Australians, and for youth at risk.

The secondary schools in these communities clearly worked closely with local employers, local business and industry associations and their neighbouring TAFE provider.

In contrast, the major industries which have a presence in the five rural communities generally established collaborative arrangements with any training provider in the region (or beyond the region) who had demonstrated the capacity to deliver the enterprise-specific training they need.

There tended to be a less clear set of linkages between public and private providers of vocational education and training and those providing mainly adult and community education programs.

Adult and community education providers had very strong relationships with community and special needs groups, local government and regional development entities.

In all but one rural community, universities were in working relationships with training providers, major employers and industry associations.

In addition to constructing network maps, focus group participants described the range of collaborative arrangements in which their organisations were engaged. Partnerships, networks and other training relationships were active in each of the five communities. Examples of these are provided below.

Networking

From both the mapping process and the discussions in the five focus groups, it is evident that stakeholders in vocational education and training have established extensive networks. These were either formal, with regular meetings and agendas, or informal, coming together as a need arises. These networks were generally designed to provide participants with mutual support, information and resource sharing and the opportunity to work together towards common understanding through regular dialogue.

VET in Schools and local government initiatives appear to have been major drivers in the development of many of the networks. In Ainsworth, Baldwin, Duncan and Ellis secondary schools had strong networks with local employers and industry representatives. The goal was generally to share information about potential training and employment opportunities and, from the schools' perspective, to identify possible work placements for their students completing lower-level training package qualifications.

In Duncan, participants described their network which has marketing days to disseminate information about careers and training. It also looks at 'training needs to keep our students here in the country'. In Ainsworth, a Resource and Networking Group made up of representatives of local businesses meets to inform the directions that training in the town should take. Training providers are involved in this decision-making.

Partnerships

Interestingly, there were only limited numbers of formally documented arrangements underpinning any of the collaborative training activities being engaged in by the organisations represented in the focus groups. Instead, partnerships were entered into in good faith and with a sense of achieving a common training goal.

In Ainsworth, a partnership arrangement had been established between business and education in order to have a facility to coordinate the placement in workplaces for school-based and other apprentices and trainees. The major strengths of this cooperative approach were seen to be the presence of a liaison person working hand-in-hand with employers and the school.

Meanwhile in Baldwin, the VET in Schools coordinator of the secondary school described their partnerships as 'evolving'. They consistently maintained a relationship with the public provider and they partnered with various employers and private training providers according to specific needs. This made the partnership arrangements quite fluid.

In Ainsworth a description was given of partnerships between TAFE, private providers of training in agriculture and people on farms in the community. It was a training initiative of the Shire Council. The adult and community education coordinator for the area noted that:

> This kind of partnership works very well because you are linking with the rural people, the training providers as well as other community organisations and the community's resources

> … This way you can deliver the training that people want … Linking with community
> organisations is the way to go.

A representative from the regional health service in Ainsworth provided an outline of the partnerships entered into by her state government agency. She noted they were undertaking traineeships under a 'breaking the unemployment cycle' initiative and were in partnership with a range of training providers, both public and private. Naturally, because they are traineeships, training was done on the job and completed in close association with the training providers. A Memorandum of Understanding was drawn up every year which described what responsibilities, services and outcomes each party could expect. She commented, 'the memorandum is very important because if you don't have it in place, it is not monitored properly and it can all fall down'.

In Baldwin, training providers, employers and other agencies working in the youth services area had pooled their resources, networks and information to better provide for the training needed in a community where youth unemployment was very high. Much of the impetus for this collaborative activity came from research conducted for local government recommending strategies to bring community youth services together.

Two major employers in Ellis had established different approaches to collaboration. The first had a formal partnership with a TAFE provider outside the region to deliver training to 34 trainees undertaking Certificate II and Certificate III in Meat Processing. The second organisation had entered into a formal auspiced arrangement with a regional university and the local TAFE provider to deliver training to 33 trainees in plastics, rubber and cable maintenance and the warehousing stream of the Transport and Distribution training package. Training was delivered on site by the employer and the training organisations monitored and quality assured processes and outcomes.

While there was clear evidence of networks and partnerships occurring in each of the rural communities, participants also raised the issue of competition between training providers and distrust by other key stakeholders.

Other cooperative activities

Community collaboration extended beyond networks and partnerships. Information and resource sharing was one of the most common activities participants identified as occurring in their communities. Training providers talked of frequently referring learners to other providers.

In Duncan, TAFE resources and facilities were being shared with the adult and community education provider. This collaboration was described in the following way:

> TAFE and [adult community education] work together to offer a joint program. They share
> resources including course modules among the same students. [Adult community education]
> uses the TAFE's computer facilities since it does not have its own building. They operate out
> of the same campus and have a joint facility.

In Colton, a small, not-for-profit training organisation engaging in information technology training was able to use both the rooms and the facilities of the TAFE, secondary school or the local community library. They generally did not have to pay for the use of these facilities. In the same community, the TAFE facilities and other resources such as training videos were available to other training providers.

It is apparent, from these examples of cooperation, that many stakeholders in these communities have developed a level of trust in each other. This trust seems to be very much dependent on personalities and personal relationships rather than more formal arrangements between participating organisations. Leaders or champions for training, who have community credibility, play a significant part in the development of this trust. Equally important is the recognition that competition has often been quite destructive and more positive outcomes for training organisations and learners can be achieved if they work together.

As one Colton participant commented:

> The thing is that there aren't enough people here to have the different organisations all doing
> exactly the same thing … you've got to interlink to make your own organisation successful
> … We just don't have the population to all go hammer and tongs at each other.

Focus group participants emphasised that although there may be a perception rural communities are scattered and not cohesive, they in fact see themselves as 'close'. This strong sense of cohesion indicates the members of these communities in fact can be supportive and responsive to each other. By its very nature, vocational education and training in rural communities holds considerable potential for cooperation, collaboration and the sharing of resources, ideas and learners.

In the communities represented in this study, participants described the advantages of collaboration as being a means of making the most of scarce financial, physical and human resources. It also allowed a strategic pooling of expertise to achieve training outcomes for industry and learners that could not be achieved without such cooperation. Collaboration was a way of sharing and disseminating information, as well as a means of ensuring the viability of some training, such as happens when providers aggregate their students to ensure sufficient numbers for particular training to occur.

Competition

However, competition rather than collaboration is an issue commonly identified in the research on vocational education and training in rural communities (Balatti & Falk 2000; Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia 2001; Owen & Bound 1998). The training market is a competitive one, and various participants in each of the focus groups expressed concerns about this issue.

For some of the training providers participating in this study, competition was seen to be necessary because they were operating within thin markets with regard to employers and work. As well, they were operating in thin markets in relation to training. One informant working in the youth services area in Baldwin confirmed this view by saying, '… in this area it is very competitive and that is hard … there is very high unemployment, the provision of training is very competitive and it is hard to maintain good relationships with people'.

There was ready acceptance that collaboration could achieve positive outcomes, particularly in rural communities. But as one New Apprenticeship Centre coordinator in Duncan acknowledged, '… trying to get people to work together to deliver the product is what it has to be about. But I don't know how you do that. There are so many petty jealousies, feuds, suspicion'.

In Colton and Duncan, training providers were grappling with cross-border competition. Where it should have been possible to work out satisfactory training arrangements for trainees and apprentices drawn from both sides of state borders, training provider concerns for their markets together with problems associated with state-based funding arrangements worked against positive training outcomes for learners.

Despite competition being seen as a barrier to collaboration by many participants, there was sufficient evidence provided in focus groups of the majority of stakeholders trusting each other enough to be willing to work together. While those working in niche markets were concerned about competition from other providers, those working in more broadly based areas of training recognised there were opportunities for all of them to have a share of that market and, what's more, there were advantages in working together to service the needs of individuals, employers and the community.

Implications for policy and practice

This study into the implementation of training packages in rural Australia confirms much of the previous research into vocational education and training in regional and remote Australia. The same issues that impacted then are mirrored in the communities described in this report.

Although training packages have been extensively implemented in these rural communities, providers struggle with thin markets and small numbers of dispersed learners engaging in training. This has had a significant effect upon funding for training provision, limiting the range of programs that can be delivered. For offerings to be enhanced in these communities, differential funding formulas may need to be applied.

At the same time, many training providers and employers were frustrated by some of the rules and regulations that attach to the funding and delivery of training. They see these as working against the national and community goal of maximising the number of people engaging in training. It was apparent that the impact of these regulations was magnified when compared with the outcomes of such policies in metropolitan areas. Larger providers working with larger populations in cities have more capacity to absorb the impact of these rules and regulations than those providers servicing rural communities.

Rural training providers who were delivering in thin markets face many of the same difficulties as those in remote locations, without the assistance of some of the policy and funding considerations made for remote communities. If a greater degree of flexibility was allowed in the way policy and procedures are applied by rural training providers, it may better enable them to meet the needs for skill development within their local communities.

Despite some of the incumbent challenges of the current competitive training market, key stakeholders in rural communities were becoming more willing to enter into collaborative activities in the interests of their learners and their communities. Clearly, much can be gained by collaboration, as is evidenced in the literature and in the five training communities in this study. The sharing of information through networks, the sharing of resources in partnerships and the joint working through of the particular issues that confront individual communities, combine to result in more effective training, business and social outcomes. The encouragement and support of networks may further enhance the level of collaboration within these communities.

Thus, any policy and financial incentives that actively support the development of networks and partnerships will encourage many more providers to engage in collaborative activities. While cooperative efforts between stakeholders have been shown to pay great dividends for rural communities, they also have direct application to any VET environment, regardless of location.

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