

Facilitating educational growth: the use of learning mentors in the DipFE program

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Every year, a large number of adults enrol in "return to study" programs with Adult & Community Education (ACE) providers with aspirations to move into more formal educational paths. A few do manage the transition into more formal tertiary institutions but many do not. For example, in 1998, ACE providers stated that only 4 to 5 per cent of their students gained higher education places and only 11 per cent gained TAFE places (Teese, 1999). Also, 42 per cent of ACE students who applied through VTAC in 1997 for 1998 tertiary education places were rejected, compared with 14 per cent of school students (Teese, 1999).

So who are these people and how can we better meet their needs? Let me tell you about two of them.

CASE STUDY 1

Fiona is 42 years old. She left school at Year 11 to work in an office and then left work to raise a family of 4 children. At school, she was an average student in most subjects. Her best subject was Mathematics. Her teachers recommended that she continue to Matriculation and university but her father did not hold with too much education for girls and was not prepared to support her past year 11.

Whilst working as a mother and homemaker, she has been very active in the Parents' Associations of the local kindergarten, primary school and high school. She was the coordinator of the tuckshop committee for the Kookaburra Flats Primary School and on the executive of both the kindergarten and high school associations.

She has some computer skills, having helped her children to research material for assignments and has used Word to type letters, tuckshop rosters etc.

Two years ago she started studying at the Community Centre at Kookaburra Flats and has just completed the Certificate of General Education for Adults (Level IV).

CASE STUDY 2

Amin left school midway through Year 11 when he was offered a fitting and turning apprenticeship with a local engineering firm. Twelve months into his training the firm was taken over by a larger company and as part of the ensuing rationalisation, Amin lost his job. He continued his training with a Group Training Company but this meant that he had three employers in fourteen months in different locations which involved him in a lot of travelling. He became discouraged and found he was not getting any satisfaction from his work so he left and got a job on the production line of a carpet manufacturer. He worked there happily for 8 years until the company moved its operations offshore and he was made redundant.

Unable to find a full-time job, Amin got some part time work with a mate Josef who ran a small computer retail outlet. He also attended the Fotherington Neighbourhood House and completed his CGEA (level 3). During this time, whilst he was juggling part-time work and study commitments together with the care of his two children one day a week, he became interested in a career in health and medical sciences.

In 1999, RMIT, as the lead agency of a consortium with the University of Ballarat, Holmesglen Institute of TAFE and three Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) regions applied for and received funding from the Office of Training and Further Education (now the Office of Post-Compulsory Education, Training and Employment) to develop and trial a program which would enable better transition to formal tertiary education programs for learners undertaking return to study programs with ACE providers. The resultant program has been accredited as the Diploma of Further Education.

The Diploma of Further Education (DipFE) provides an alternative pathway into tertiary education programs for those whose personal, geographical, family, educational history and other circumstances means that they are disadvantaged and/or unable to equitably participate in other entry mechanisms.

The philosophy behind the development of the Diploma of Further Education is very much that of empowerment through the development of the capacity for independent, autonomous and self-directed lifelong learning. In the Report prepared for UNESCO, Delors (1996) states that learning throughout life is based on four pillars: learning to know; learning to do; learning to live with others and learning to be.

The ACFE Board has taken these four pillars and expanded them into eight lifelong learning goals, which provide a reference point for all curriculum written within the new conceptual framework for Further Education. That is, learners will be encouraged to understand complex systems that interact unpredictably; identify and integrate existing and emerging personal, local, national and global perspectives; prosper with difference, paradox and multiple sets of realities; see and make connections between the past and present and the future; encourage sustainability in relationships and the environment; engage in a process of change, privately and publicly, civically and occupationally, throughout life; extend learning styles and repertoires and develop insights through questioning, through asking 'why?' and 'what if?' as well as 'what?' and 'how?'. (Bradshaw 1999, p. 23)

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Shift to autonomous and independent learning

The Diploma of Further Education curriculum has been designed for those seeking to prepare themselves for the challenges of tertiary education. It thus aims to enable learners to work towards these educational goals through a learning experience based on recognising and encompassing the multiplicity and connectedness of learning, the critical intelligence it requires and the transformation inherent in growing autonomy and independence and in the exercise of thoughtful action.

Recognition of existing competence

The course will start with those outcomes which learners are already achieving with ACFE provision and build on this base. As the students move through the program, they will undertake TAFE and Higher Education modules. This will not only increase their skills and knowledge but also their confidence as it will enable them to become familiar with their intended educational destinations, cultures and practices.

Individually negotiated

The Diploma of Further Education is a framework curriculum which will enable a multiplicity of learning pathways to meet individual needs and destinations. Through its core modules, it provides a mechanism for the learner to explore their own learning needs and to map a learning program using modules from accredited vocational education and training and higher education programs and courses. This learning program will be negotiated with staff from the destination higher education institution to ensure that it meets adult entry requirements and selection process criteria. The negotiation process will also prepare students for their future studies by helping them to understand the values, assumptions and conventions which underpin different forms of higher.

Generic Outcomes

Learners in the Diploma of Further Education program undertake four core modules. These modules enable learners to organise and monitor their own learning and to develop explicit consciousness of their strengths, weaknesses and preferences as a learner. They also enable learners to explore

different tertiary options and to develop an individual learning path through which they can prepare themselves for entry into the tertiary course of their choice.

The outcomes of the Diploma of Further Education will be the enhancement of the learner's personal knowledge through self-assessment; ability to learn and to self-manage one's learning; information literacy; research skills; writing skills; specific knowledge and skills related to a specific HE destination and familiarity with higher education environments.

Assessment by portfolio

As part of the Diploma of Further Education, students will develop a portfolio which provides evidence of their learning and competence and which, in addition to having intrinsic value to the student, will be useful in negotiating adult entry to the higher education institution of the student's choice. They will have a learner mentor who will be able to assist them to develop and validate their learning pathway and move towards autonomy and confidence as learners.

Learning Mentor

A key feature of the Diploma of Further Education is the role played by the learning mentor. The learning mentor plays a key role in supporting the learner as he/she develops the necessary competence and confidence to move from learning dependency to independency; from an intimate learning environment to a larger, institutionalised learning environment; from a prescribed learning path to an individually developed learning pathway and towards learning autonomy and empowerment as an individual to negotiate the resolution of one's learning needs

Skill development at point of Need

The intermeshing of the Reflective Learning and Planning modules at each stage of the Diploma of Further Education program provides a mechanism for students to learn skills in context and at the point of need. Skills are therefore being applied as they are developed and integrated into the learner's cognitive structures in a form which is readily retrievable.

Reflection and Self-Assessment

The development of habits of active and critical reflection and of the capacity to accurately self-assess one's learning progress are key features of the Diploma of Further Education. Learners are encouraged also to recognise the multiplicity and diversity of approach inherent in all learning and to develop an accurate appraisal of the interaction of context, learner and learning.

So how does the Diploma of Further Education work in practice? Let's return to Fiona and Amin's story.

Fiona enrolls in two modules within the DipFE, that is:
VBJ 506 Reflective Learning and Planning 1A and
VBJ 507 Reflective Learning and Planning 1B.

Initial Learning Pathway

As part of her work towards these modules she designs a learning pathway which she (and her learning mentor) believe will help her prepare for university studies in Marketing. The development of this learning pathway involves Fiona in developing a greater awareness of her strengths, weaknesses, aspirations and stumbling blocks, new computer skills as she learns to access material from the WWW and also planning skills as she develops an action plan for achieving her educational goals.

Entry Requirements and Pre-requisites

In conjunction with her learning mentor, Fiona looks at the entry requirements for the Diploma in Business (Marketing). The following entry competencies are specified:

Writing and Communication Skills:

Prepare and present written documents in language and format appropriate to a specific brief
Communicate ideas and information orally and in written form
Deliver oral presentations of information relevant to a specific task

Computer Skills:

Apply basic word processing skills

Research and Analysis:

Collect, organise and analyse information

Evaluate information for relevance, accuracy and completeness

Financial Management and Budgeting:

Apply basic mathematical skills

Team and Personal Management:

Work in teams with minimal supervision to achieve agreed outcomes

Work independently

Demonstrate time management skills

Fiona considers that her CGEA studies and the work she has already completed in her core DipFE subjects plus her experience in managing a family, working within a fairly tight budget and coordinating the school tuckshop roster has enabled her to develop these entry competencies. To make sure, she rings the Mavis McKinnon Institute of TAFE and makes an appointment to see a course adviser from their business studies department. She takes her partially completed portfolio to the meeting and the course adviser agrees that she would be eligible for entry, He also gives her some idea of when the modules she has chosen would be offered in the coming year.

None of the modules she has chosen have specified pre-requisites.

Negotiating the Learning Pathway

Fiona then rings the nearest University which offers a Bachelor in Business with a Marketing stream and makes an appointment to meet with a course adviser. At this meeting, she discusses her choice of a learning path with the adviser, Ben. He agrees that she has chosen a well-balanced set of modules. He suggests that the essay which is part of Reflective Learning and Planning 1B should outline her understanding of Marketing and her reasons for wanting to pursue a career in this field.

Fiona and Ben then negotiate certain modules which would be conditional to her entry into the Bachelor of Business and makes suggestions as to the evidence she should provide to the selection officer when she applies for Adult Entry.

He also suggests that Fiona might model her research project to be undertaken in Reflective Learning and Practice 2A on the Marketing Project module within the Diploma of Business (Marketing). Ben believed that such a program would enable her to not only meet the Adult Entry requirements but it would also give her the skills and confidence to articulate smoothly into her University studies. He also felt that she might be eligible to apply for the dual award which was offered by the University in conjunction with the Mavis McKinnon Institute.

Outcomes

Fiona then develops an action plan and over the next two years she successfully completes the following modules at the Kookaburra Flats Neighbourhood House and at the Mavis McKinnon Institute:

Core Modules

VBA 506	Reflective Learning and Practice 1A	70 hours
VBA 507	Reflective Learning and Practice 1B	70 hours

Negotiated Modules

NCS 008	Presenting Information	20 hours
VBA 509	Marketing Communications	51 hours
VBA 488	Applied Business Computer Applications	51 hours
VBA 485	The Marketing Concept	68 hours

Elective Modules

VBA 498	Financial Decision Making	50 hours
NCS 005	Dealing with Conflict	20 hours
NCS 009	Negotiation Skills	20 hours

At this stage, Fiona is met the requirements for the qualification Certificate IV in Further Education. She continues to work through her action plan by undertaking the following units towards her Diploma of Education.

Core Modules

VBA 508	Reflective Learning and Practice 2A	60 hours
VBA 509	Reflective Learning and Practice 2B	60 hours

Elective Modules

VBA 494	Microeconomics	51 hours
VBA 493	Business Statistics	51 hours
VBD 200	Business Analysis Methods	51 hours
NCS 015	Presenting Reports	20 hours
FMC 5.1	Manage Work Priorities and professional development	

At this stage Fiona applies for and is given Adult Entry into the Bachelor of Business (Marketing) program at the Jessie Street University of Technology. She successfully gains her degree in the minimum time and is employed by a local branch of a multinational IT enterprise as a marketing executive.

Amin also enrolled in the Diploma of Further Education and looked at ways in which he might fulfil this ambition.

Initial Learning Pathway

From his research into possible courses of study, Amin notes that by completing a Diploma of Applied Science in Medical Laboratory Technology, he would be eligible for entry into the Bachelor of Medical Science offered at the Ormond University of Technology.

Accordingly, he makes an appointment and goes to see a course advisor at the nearby campus of the Caraway Institute of TAFE. He finds that, although the usual course entry is through VTAC or for those already employed within the industry, a small number of places are reserved for special entry. He collects all the necessary information, resulting in an agreed program by which he might prepare himself for entry into the Diploma of Applied Science.

Negotiating the Learning Pathway

After discussion with his learning mentor, Amin goes back to see the course adviser at the Carroway Institute to check whether he is eligible to apply for RPL on the basis of his:

partially completed apprenticeship; his CGEA studies; the core modules within the Diploma of FE program which he is currently undertaking; his part time work in the computing area which included providing training for customers in the use of spreadsheets and other software applications.

He is advised that he is and so he applies for RPL for six modules which form part of the Certificate IV in Laboratory Technology in Biological Sciences:

His RPL application is completely successful, so he now meets with the course advisers from both the TAFE Institute and the Ormond University of Technology to negotiate his learning pathway. Between them they agree that on the modules that will form the negotiated part of Amin's learning pathway and discuss the evidence that should form the basis of his DipFE portfolio

Outcomes

Amin then develops an action plan and finds that he can undertake his desired program in 12 months if he takes VCE Mathematics Level 3 & 4 instead of the specific TAFE modules because of timetable clashes. So in the following years he successfully completes the following program:

Core Modules			
VBA 506	Reflective Learning and Practice 1A	70 hours	
VBA 507	Reflective Learning and Practice 1B	70 hours	
Negotiated Modules			
	VCE Mathematics Levels 3& 4	80 hours	
AAA600	Science Industry Orientation	20 hours	
AAA630	Computer Fundamentals	25 hours	RPL
AAA631	Scientific Spreadsheet Applications	25 hours	RPL
NCS015	Presenting Reports	20 hours	RPL
Elective Modules			
AAA642	Statistics and Methods of Sampling	40 hours	
AAA602	Laboratory Operations	40 hours	
AAA620	Principles of Instrumentation	50 hours	

At this stage Amin has met the requirements for the Certificate IV in Further Education and moves across to the Carroway Institute of TAFE to complete his Certificate IV in Laboratory Technology in Biological Sciences and the Diploma of Applied Science in Medical Laboratory Technology. Whilst he is doing this he also continues with the core modules for the Diploma in Further Education (that is Reflective Learning and Planning 2A & 2B) as he feels this will help him develop the study skills which he will need for his further study.

On finishing his TAFE studies, he is accepted into the Bachelor of Medical Laboratory Science at the Ormond University of Technology, with advanced standing so that he enters the second year of the undergraduate program. He passes his course with good grades, obtains a job with a prestigious research laboratory and goes on to post-graduate studies.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The Diploma of Education (DipFE) is a fairly new program but it has generated a lot of interest and enrolments. It also promises to be an effective pathway via which adults returning to study can clarify and achieve their educational and vocational aspirations. Of the twenty-two participants in the pilot program, eighteen have been accepted into the tertiary program of their choice, three are continuing their DipFE studies while one has realised she was aiming to high and has transferred to a Certificate II program. The DipFE provides a learner centred program for adults negotiating the often rocky path into and between tertiary institutions. As a staff member from one of the trialing universities said:

There are many people out there who need an individually tailored pathway. [The Diploma] is so flexible. It is the education of the future - focusing on the individual's needs rather than the [provider]. (Palmieri 2000, p. 4)

The Diploma of Education provides a viable educational pathway for many learners disadvantaged by circumstances, geography, etc.. The role of the learning mentor is the pivotal feature which allows for individual students, pursuing different goals to work collegially to support, encourage and challenge each other. Being a learning mentor is not an easy role but those involved in the pilot program unanimously agreed that it was an extremely rewarding one.

There are a number of other areas where a similar curriculum framework supported by the use of learning mentors would provide a learning pathway between educational institutions. Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders and adults with non-English speaking backgrounds are obvious targets. Of greater challenge, but of equally greater importance, would be the tailoring of a program which would help disadvantaged youth cross the divide into work and education.

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