

ACE VET linkages - provider, student and industry views

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ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been a broadening of the range of learning offered by Adult and Community Education (ACE) to include vocational learning as well as the hobby, enrichment and personal development programs traditionally provided in the past. This paper reports on an National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) study which surveyed the opinions of ACE providers, ACE students and industry organisations regarding ACE vocational education and training (VET) and its linkage with mainstream VET (predominantly technical and further education - TAFE). Issues discussed in the paper include:

- identification of characteristics which distinguish ACE VET from mainstream VET
- mainstream VET sector awareness of ACE VET and linkages with mainstream VET
- current availability of linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET, and ways of improving them
- vocational training needs ACE might address
- interaction between the ACE and mainstream VET sectors
- whether ACE VET should complement or compete with mainstream VET.

For many years, the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector was primarily a provider of general education; education focusing on lifestyle, recreation, leisure, personal enrichment, equity, and basic living skills like literacy, numeracy and domestic food preparation. However, in recent years the range of learning offered has been extended to include vocationally oriented learning. Some of this is merely an extension of that previously offered - for it has been recognised that people can apply some of what they learn under the banner of general education in their work. But, over time, ACE has moved towards provision of learning specifically intended to meet vocational needs - needs which, in many cases, were perceived as not being fully met by existing vocational education provision.

ACE vocational education and training (ACE VET) has much to offer in the context of lifelong learning in that it can provide a 'softer' introduction to vocational learning than that offered by mainstream VET. This can be particularly beneficial to individuals who have limited experience of vocational learning, or who have not participated in vocational learning for extended periods of time, or may have had previous unhappy learning experiences.

Having completed initial vocational learning with ACE, many students seek to continue their studies. Sometimes subsequent learning can be undertaken with ACE, however where ACE does not offer anything suitable, it may be necessary to move across to another sector - most commonly to mainstream VET which is predominantly represented by TAFE.

Often, the subject matter that has been studied with ACE overlaps that offered by mainstream VET or can satisfy mainstream VET prerequisites for enrolment in a course. Where this is the case students can be given credit for their completed ACE study. Sometimes this takes the form of direct credit (credit transfer), at other times students gain credit through recognition of prior learning (RPL) or recognition of current competencies (RCC). Arrangements through which students are given credit are generally referred to as linkages. Where linkages have been established by agreement between the two sectors, they give rise to pathways which enable students to pursue planned study routes that traverse both sectors. It should be noted that linkages and pathways can also apply to movement in the other direction - that is, from mainstream VET to ACE, or between other educational sectors.

This paper summarises recent research conducted by NCVET into linkages between vocational education and training provided by the ACE sector and that provided by mainstream VET (mostly TAFE). After identifying characteristics which differentiate ACE VET from mainstream VET, it examines issues relating to linkages between ACE and mainstream VET courses and looks at strategies for improving them. It also looks at vocational needs ACE might address in the future and finally considers the issue of how the ACE and mainstream VET sectors interact.

Features of ACE VET

To many people, ACE learning can be summed up as comprising highly focused programs, often short in length, aimed at providing learners with desired knowledge and skills in a friendly, supportive environment. By extending this definition we can define ACE VET simply as ACE learning which provides vocational knowledge and skills.

When ACE students and providers were asked to identify the features which most distinguish it from mainstream VET, their most common responses fell into four categories as set out below. To many people, these features represent the 'strengths' of ACE VET.

Flexibility of provision

In the context of this discussion, flexibility of provision relates to the ability to cater for the needs of students who find it difficult to fit in study with other commitments (perhaps because of timetabling or location of venue). ACE VET was seen to be more flexible than mainstream VET by about three-quarters of the ACE providers and students surveyed.

Course content and delivery matches student and enterprise needs

Many people felt that ACE, because of its close association with local communities, businesses and students, is in closer touch with vocational needs than mainstream VET organisations. In ACE, the trainer often deals directly with the workplace, determining requirements, designing the training program and teaching it, thus helping to ensure the training accurately matches workplace requirements. With the advent of training packages, this is seen as an especially valuable asset. By being able to attract and draw on part-time teachers and trainers from a wide range of

backgrounds, ACE is also in a strong position to select appropriate people for the task.

Friendly, supportive, non-bureaucratic learning environment

Many students, providers and industry representatives strongly praised the informal friendly and supportive nature of ACE. Indeed, the success of ACE as a provider of vocational learning is largely due to the fact that it is perceived as being less intimidating than most mainstream VET organisations. People feel more comfortable studying with ACE, particularly those who, for one reason or another, are apprehensive about study or need ongoing reassurance and support. This feature can be especially important to people who need to return to study because of job changes or loss of employment. Through linkages, some of these people move on to mainstream VET, something they might never have contemplated prior to studying with ACE.

Nature and quality of the courses

People appreciate the care with which ACE courses are designed and the easy-going style of presentation. Students, employers and other industry people indicated that they liked the focused nature of the course content, which in turn helped make the courses relevant and to the point. 'Short', 'sharp', 'snappy' and 'punchy' were words commonly used to describe ACE vocational courses.

Mainstream VET staff knowledge of ACE VET and credit transfer

Results of the study indicate that numerous individuals and organisations are disadvantaged through lack of information about the range of vocational study available from ACE and the possibility of linking it with mainstream VET. Without adequate information, potential students of ACE VET may enrol with other providers in courses less appropriate to their needs or may even refrain from enrolling at all. In the latter case this represents possible lost opportunities for mainstream VET (through the individuals concerned never being in a position to move on from ACE to mainstream VET).

ACE providers saw mainstream VET staff as being largely unaware of the scope of ACE provision and the existence of linkages, and suggested various ways in which they might be assisted to improve their knowledge of ACE VET. These included identification of key linkage staff in each institution, greater cross-sectoral interaction between key linkage staff, visits to each other's campuses, facilitation of phone and email contact, and identification of mainstream VET personnel to whom ACE VET information can be forwarded. Measures to improve ACE VET information included short, reader friendly cross-sectoral ACE VET information newsletters, electronic provision of ACE VET information (websites and email), arranging for ACE presence in mainstream VET information centres at enrolment times and use of national module numbers in ACE course information where relevant.

Linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET

Linkages enable students who have completed ACE VET to have their learning credited towards mainstream VET study (and vice versa). If students are to gain maximum benefit from linkages, the linkages must be readily available, easily

accessed and effective. Indications from research were that there were limitations on all of these aspects.

Availability of linkages

When ACE providers were asked to rate the availability of linkages, in the form of credit transfer, from ACE VET to mainstream VET, just over half saw it as either *limited* or *very limited*. And when asked to indicate whether there were any difficulties encountered in arranging credit transfer from ACE to mainstream VET, again, just over half indicated there were at least some difficulties (30% indicating they encountered *some* difficulties and 24% indicating *many*).

Difficulties cited by ACE providers included:

- indifference of mainstream VET towards ACE and ACE VET credit transfer processes
- lack of recognition of ACE course credentials and of ACE as a legitimate provider of VET, with consequent need for ACE to repeatedly justify course outcomes to mainstream VET for credit transfer purposes
- a tendency for mainstream VET to award credit for ACE learning on the basis of course length (ie time required to complete a course) rather than course content
- excessive need for ACE students to resort to RPL as a means of linking their completed course with mainstream VET
- a lack of awareness, both in ACE and mainstream VET, of the other sector's programs
- a lack of consistency in credit decisions (eg two persons completing the same course being given different credit).

Strategies for improving ACE-mainstream VET linkages

In view of the importance of linkages to students and industry, consideration should be given to removing impediments to their creation and implementation. The following strategies were suggested by ACE providers.

Provide linkage assistance to students

When faced with complicated procedures and a bewildering range of options regarding linking ACE course outcomes to mainstream VET study, students may not always make the best decision, or may give up altogether. Assistance to students should include: provision of regularly updated information on linkages to staff and students, provision of simple guidelines to students and staff on options available and processes to be followed, and provision of direct personal assistance to students preparing cases for RPL or RCC.

Improve communication, cooperation and collaboration between the two sectors

To achieve better provision and utilisation of linkages, there needs to be improvement in communication, cooperation and collaboration across the sectors. To achieve this, the quality of information on ACE VET and its availability to mainstream VET should be improved, and joint ACE-mainstream VET workshops on linkages should be conducted to help acquaint mainstream VET with the standard of ACE VET courses and the professional expertise and integrity of ACE VET staff. Joint workshops would also foster openness and cordiality between linkage staff of the two sectors - qualities which can be quite important to the effectiveness of linkage processes.

Improve promulgation of ACE VET information

To improve access to ACE VET linkages, there needs to be greater promulgation of information about ACE VET course content and linkages. Linkage information should be disseminated through linkage-specific newsletters to ACE and mainstream VET peak bodies. More general newsletters and other publications, containing a register of ACE centres offering vocational courses and a regularly updated list of the courses and linkages available, should be distributed to industry through ITABs, employer associations and similar peak bodies.

Appoint coordinators to act between ACE and mainstream VET

More than three-quarters of ACE providers surveyed favoured the idea of coordinators working with clusters of ACE and mainstream VET providers to coordinate activity across the interface between the two sectors. The role of these coordinators would be to liaise with providers, disseminate information across the cluster, coordinate meetings, and prepare or assist providers with submissions (in NSW some ACE Regional Coordinators and ACE Regional Council Officers are already performing some of these functions).

The benefits offered by appropriately trained coordinators include enhanced communication and rapport across the sectors (particularly where there was a risk that personality or philosophical differences between sector personnel could inhibit effective communication) and maintenance of continuity in relationships between ACE and mainstream VET providers when there were changes in key institution personnel.

Utilise ACE as a regional training broker or coordinator

Provision of vocational training to individuals and groups in outlying areas is often made difficult by the lack of suitable mainstream vocational providers in an area. In many cases, there may be an ACE provider who can assist. While the ACE provider may not have the expertise or resources to actually teach the technical knowledge and skills, it may have the educational, organisational and entrepreneurial expertise to manage and coordinate learning in the workplace and the community. So ACE, through cooperative arrangements, may well be able to assist mainstream VET providers who do not have a venue in a particular area to provide vocational training to local students.

Co-locate ACE and mainstream VET providers on single campuses

Several respondents from the ACE sector commented favourably on benefits associated with ACE and mainstream VET operating from the same campus, particularly in regard to pathways between ACE and mainstream VET.

Increase cooperation in the provision of language and literacy programs

Language and literacy have long been areas in which both ACE and mainstream VET have had involvement. Consideration should be given to fostering effective cooperative approaches to provision of these programs where practicable.

Develop an effective system for cross-sector referral

For students to benefit from linkages, they must choose a study path that enables them to begin with the course most appropriate to their immediate needs and subsequently move on, via the linkages, to a course in another sector. Sometimes this requires an initial referral to a course in another sector. Referrals between ACE and mainstream VET do occur, however most ACE personnel feel that the number of referrals is well below the optimum level. Further development of strategies to foster cross-sector referrals would contribute to more effective utilisation of ACE-mainstream VET linkages.

Share resources between ACE and mainstream VET

One aspect of ACE-mainstream VET cooperation and collaboration suggested by ACE commentators was the sharing of resources such as equipment, premises, teaching staff, and even advertising of courses. Potential benefits of resource sharing, both to ACE and mainstream VET, were: more effective utilisation of funds (through pooling) to provide a better range and quality of resources; and more efficient utilisation of the resources through less idle time.

If the resources are shared in common with mainstream VET, there could be an added benefit for ACE VET in that ACE might be more likely to be perceived as 'teaching to the same standards' as mainstream VET. As a consequence, ACE VET outcomes might be more readily recognised by mainstream, VET making linkages easier to achieve.

Vocational training needs which ACE should address

If ACE is to be an effective provider of vocational training it must take into account the needs of industry as well as the community. ACE providers and industry representatives have suggested that the following industry and associated community needs should be addressed in relation to ACE VET:

- Offer flexibility in course structure, timetabling, delivery format, class size and venue to better satisfy industry and individual needs.
- Include local community focus in determining vocational needs of individuals and businesses.
- Encourage and assist people to commence or return to vocational study - particularly people intimidated by mainstream vocational training organisations and the prospect of 'formal' study.
- Provide vocational learning for people affected by industry change. These include: young people who need to acquire and extend their knowledge and skills, who need to present well and sell their knowledge and skills to a potential employer or client, or who need, in some cases, to commence their working careers as self-employed individuals; and older people who need to retrain in an existing job, compete more effectively for employment, or cope with the prospect of self-employment as an alternative no employment at all.

- Provide package-based training. ACE - with its flexibility and ability to adapt to change, its close affinity to students and its potential for communicating and interacting with local business, especially in smaller communities - should be in a strong position to become a provider of training package-based learning.
- Provide 'segmented' training - that is, short, sharp, focused courses, said to be increasingly sought by industry.
- Provide customised training to meet the needs of individuals and organisations.
- Provide training via the Internet - particularly to regional students whose course requires that they be observed from time to time putting the knowledge and skills into practice.
- Provide entry-level training and job seeking skills to enable individuals to gain entry-level qualifications in an industry, develop job-seeking skills, develop Mayer key competencies and, where necessary, improve language and literacy skills.
- Provide training in management, office and interpersonal skills, such as business management, basic accounting, communication, computer packages (office and small business), report writing, supervision, conflict resolution and networking.
- Provide training in information technology - the abilities of ACE to employ trainers from industry with the latest knowledge and skills and to provide short, focused courses were seen as assets in providing training for this rapidly changing industry sector.
- Provide vocational training for special groups such as people with low language or literacy skills, people with low levels of schooling, women seeking to re-enter the work force, indigenous groups, people with disabilities and job-seekers.
- Provide individualised learning for Centrelink clients.
- Provide trainer training to industry - especially in remote areas.
- Use ACE expertise as an education broker or coordinator to act on behalf of the many skilled vocational training personnel who, having taken retirement packages, seek to work on a casual or part-time basis but lack resources or skills to market their services.
- Establish training partnerships with enterprises and assist with workplace training. ACE - with its ability to develop close relationships with local enterprises, its strong regional presence, established educational background, and ability to recruit industry people with up-to-date knowledge and skills as

trainers - is perceived to be well suited to this type of role.

- Provide supervision, mentoring or tutoring in association with mainstream VET providers in regions not able to be adequately serviced by mainstream VET.

Interaction between ACE and mainstream VET

The effectiveness of linkages between ACE and mainstream VET is dependent on the quality of interaction between the two sectors. Key factors affecting this interaction are the levels of cooperation and collaboration between the sector personnel involved and the effectiveness of communication. Interaction will also be substantially affected by the degree to which ACE chooses to complement or compete with mainstream VET.

Should ACE complement or compete with mainstream VET?

In the past, ACE VET has been largely complementary to mainstream VET, providing courses which tie in with mainstream VET offerings rather than duplicate them. With increasing emphasis on vocational learning, some ACE providers are now registered training organisations, offering accredited courses which are essentially the same as those offered by mainstream VET. In this respect, they are moving from a complementary role to a more competitive one. When ACE providers and students were asked whether ACE should be complementary or competitive with mainstream VET, about three-quarters of each group felt it should be complementary.

Reasons for adopting a complementary role were generally based on the argument that competition would waste ACE funds, staff, facilities and other resources. Comments in favour of increased competition came mainly from students and were frequently based on the premise that competition provided greater choice for students. However, in small communities, competition leading to duplication of learning provision would mean that resources which might be used to provide other needed programs could be lost. In that sense, the variety and choice of programs available to the community would be decreased. Other comments in favour of increased competition were that ACE might be able to offer courses which are more suitable for some people than the equivalent ones available in mainstream VET, and that competition would push up the standards of teachers and course content.

A related issue was the suggestion by some commentators that mainstream VET, particularly TAFE, was moving into what was perceived to be the province of ACE. Increased competition between the two sectors, therefore, could be the result of shifts in the focus of both educational sectors. One provider saw the move of mainstream VET towards ACE-style provision as impacting on ACE's long-term survival.

Need for cooperation and collaboration

If ACE and mainstream VET are to work together effectively there needs to be cooperation and collaboration between the two sectors, especially if the two sectors are to complement each other. When ACE providers were asked to rate the current

extent of collaboration and cooperation between ACE and mainstream VET, nearly three-quarters suggested it was less than adequate and that more needed to be done to facilitate joint ACE-mainstream VET undertakings. Some of the strategies they favoured as a means of improving ACE mainstream VET interaction were:

- increased information sharing between ACE and mainstream VET
- development of strategic alliances between ACE and mainstream VET
- establishment of learning pathways by continued negotiation
- better sharing and allocation of responsibilities for provision of related courses
- joint provision of courses
- shared use of resources such as premises, teachers and equipment
- development of a clearly identifiable national ACE VET structure (to complement that of mainstream VET), including better identification and coordination of current ACE VET provision at local, regional and state levels
- cross-representation on ACE and mainstream VET management bodies.

Conclusion

Vocational learning provided by the ACE sector offers benefits to learners and industry. Compared with VET available from mainstream providers, ACE VET often offers greater flexibility in venues, times and delivery modes. It also offers people the opportunity to undertake vocational study in an informal, friendly and supportive learning environment and, by encouraging people to take up or return to vocational study, is conducive to lifelong learning. The local focus of ACE providers also enables them to tailor courses to match the needs of local enterprises and communities.

Linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET enable learners to more easily extend their learning by receiving credit for previous learning in one sector when they move to the other. However, for students to derive maximum benefit from linkages, each sector must be fully acquainted with the linkage concept and willing to recognise vocational learning provided by the other. This requires cooperation and collaboration between the two sectors, which in turn necessitate better communication. It is hoped that by highlighting some of the issues involved and ways in which they may be managed, this paper can contribute to further development and increased utilisation of linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET.

References

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