Measuring performance:
using surveys for institutional feedback and planning

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, vocational education and training (VET) providers have been increasingly required to report against key performance indicators as negotiated with their funding bodies. In addition, many providers are keen to seek feedback from their various client groups to inform their quality improvement and planning processes.

Typical performance indicators include student, graduate and employer satisfaction ratings. While the results from nationally conducted surveys can greatly assist registered training organisations (RTOs) in determining these indicators for their particular organisation, it is often necessary for VET providers to conduct their own surveys and analyse the collected data.

This paper will discuss sources of readily available data and ways in which VET providers may seek to analyse and supplement the information it provides. It will also examine the issues around institutional surveys, such as: picking your time; getting a reliable response rate; questionnaire fatigue; what to do when you receive conflicting information; using the data to inform decision making; and walking the political tightrope.

INTRODUCTION

The amount of client feedback and reporting against performance indicators incumbent upon VET providers has steadily increased over recent years. With the phenomenon of questionnaire fatigue affecting responses to surveys within the sector, it is now time to develop a strategic approach to conducting institutionally based surveys.

Further, increasing resource restrictions means that the provider based VET researcher has to be not only aware of the limits to their own resources and time, but also those of personnel who may be implementing improvements to products and services as a result of survey findings.

ACCESSING EXISTING DATA AND OBTAINING ADDITIONAL DATA

Part of being strategic about conducting surveys within an RTO is to access the results of surveys and other data that have already been collected. Not only does this save time and money, it also helps to reduce the number of surveys in which client groups are asked to participate.

The most useful existing survey results for a provider based researcher are undoubtedly the annual NCVER Student Outcomes Survey and the biennial NCVER Employer Satisfaction Survey. In addition, institutional data collected for AVETMISS reporting purposes can be very helpful when establishing student profiles or determining the statistical reliability of responses to surveys.

However, the existing data and survey results do not always meet the information needs of RTOs. For instance, while the national surveys may provide sufficient responses at an institute level and even possibly at a division / faculty / school level, it would be rare to find sufficient responses at the department or program level from which to draw statistically reliable conclusions.

This can be illustrated by the 1999 Employer Satisfaction Survey conducted by AC Nielsen Research for NCVER. A total of 1215 businesses were contacted in the ACT. 214 of these employed recent VET graduates, but only 81 employed recent CIT graduates. So while the original sample of ACT businesses was statistically reliable, the sample of businesses employing recent CIT graduates was not.

Further, while NCVER makes efforts to discuss survey needs with local RTOs, it is virtually impossible for a national survey to take into account all of the local idiosyncrasies and variations which may occur.

Because of these types of issues, the provider based researcher may often need to conduct their own surveys. The questions that then arise are: how? when? The key to addressing these questions is to tailor surveys and other data collection activities to meet the provider's particular and current information needs in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

Paper based surveys are often a popular choice. When surveying a large population or sample, they can be relatively resource and time efficient. However, there is increasing resistance to completing lengthy questionnaires, possibly as a result of too many questionnaires and not enough evidence of action as an outcome. There is also a generally increased pace of life. In addition, some clients may have insufficient literacy skills to understand the questions and/or to respond. All of these factors (and others!) can have a significant impact upon obtaining a good response rate.

One way around this is to undertake a census. For example, when the CIT Student Opinion Survey was conducted in 1997 as a mail out survey, there was a response rate of about 12%. Because CIT wanted to obtain a better overall response rate and to obtain statistically reliable results at the department and program level, the 1999 CIT Student Opinion Survey was undertaken as a census. The response rate was 61%. This approach was good in that it elicited responses from a larger number of students, although it did require the co-operation of a lot of other staff in the Institute. It was therefore much more complex in terms of the logistics of the survey. Further, the higher response rate meant much more data entry and analysis.

Telephone surveys are also fairly resource intensive. Still, they can often be used to dig deeper than paper based surveys and are often better at obtaining a good response rate from target groups. They are particularly effective when surveying a relatively small population or a population that is geographically scattered.

For example, in the CIT module non-completions project, a telephone survey was used to ask non-completers why they did not complete the module(s) in which they were enrolled. This method was chosen because it was considered that the likely response rate to a mail out questionnaire would be small and it would have been difficult to bring the students together for focus groups. The staff conducting the telephone interviews found that they could probe into the students' reasons for not completing modules, often supplying information (such as CIT processes and contacts) to the students in the process.

The beauty of focus groups is that they generate discussion between the people being surveyed and generally result in a richer quality of information. They are fairly resource and time intensive, but can be used to good effect when wanting to disseminate information as well as gathering it.

For example, in both the 1998 CIT Employer Satisfaction Survey and the 1999 NCVER Employer Satisfaction Survey, employers indicated that they would like to be more involved in the design of programs. What they perhaps are unaware of is the fact that a lot of programs are now based on nationally developed training packages and curricula and so the opportunity for input at the local level can be limited. Further, they may not be aware of other local industry members who have contributed to the design of the programs in some way. The solution to this problem is probably one of education about the processes involved. A move away from paper based and/or telephone surveys and a move towards focus groups and subsequent information dissemination may assist here.

One simple way of gaining additional feedback from clients is to add a question or two to existing forms. For example, when completing application forms, students could be asked how they found out about the program they are applying for; when completing enrolment forms, students could be asked whether they intended to complete the entire program or only some modules.

Another aspect to consider is the relative merits of extensive surveys and short, focussed surveys. While conducting comprehensive surveys gives you the opportunity to collect a lot of data on a range of topics, there is often the need to gather a few key pieces of information on a particular topic. Further, extensive surveys often highlight the need for further investigation in particular areas. This can often be most easily achieved by a short, focussed survey that may be conducted as a focus group rather than a paper based survey.

For example, one issue arising from the survey of successful completers conducted as part of the CIT module non-completions project was that about one-third of respondents considered that the library resources were not applicable to them. Because of this, it was decided to conduct a short, focussed survey about library resources and facilities. In this way, more in-depth information could be gained about the library that would assist staff to make the library more attractive and accessible to students.

OUTCOMES THAT COUNT

Ultimately, the results of client feedback surveys should be used to support decision making within an RTO, preferably as part of its quality assurance and continuous improvement cycle (plan, do, check, improve).

Consequently, the provider based researcher needs to ensure that recommendations are framed in an appropriate manner, taking into account tensions between what clients are saying and the potential pool of resources available to implement changes. The researcher must therefore form a bridge between managers / staff within the provider and their clients.

For example, in the 1999 CIT Student Opinion Survey, nearly one-quarter of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that there was sufficient internet access in the library. Consequently, one recommendation of the report on the survey was that the amount of internet access be reviewed as to its sufficiency and sustainability. (The real issue here is that students want to have unlimited free internet access, while the Institute has a limited budget.)

Probably the most important thing a provider based researcher can do is to advocate the development of action plans around the findings of surveys and their recommendations. In this way, feedback from clients can result in real actions and improvements and help overcome the feeling of apathy clients face when asked to complete a questionnaire or similar.

Further, there has to be sufficient time between surveys in which to implement improvements. Otherwise, survey results will continually indicate the same issues and clients will become disillusioned with the whole process of client feedback. For example, the 1999 CIT Student Opinion Survey yielded a lot of information about the perceptions and experiences of students at CIT. Because of the magnitude of the survey, action plans for implementing changes have only recently been developed and changes will be implemented this year. Therefore, there is not much value in conducting such a complex survey again this year. Instead, CIT will conduct short, focussed surveys on particular issues.

Also of crucial importance is fitting into the teaching cycle of the institute. There is little point attempting to seek feedback from clients at certain times of the year. For example, students just commencing their programs may not have had sufficient experience of the program or the institute to be able to give fully informed comment. Students in the middle of examinations are not that likely to be interested in giving carefully considered responses to a lengthy questionnaire.

In order to facilitate the most effective uptake of information and knowledge generated from the survey results, the planning cycle of the RTO also needs to be taken into account when conducting surveys. For instance, there is not much point in providing survey results in December if they were needed for planning purposes in September.

CIT now develops an annual survey plan that identifies when and how surveys will be conducted. The timeframes are designed so that the results feed into the planning cycle and each faculty / division is required to establish their own action plan in response to the findings. In this way, client feedback surveys are becoming an integral part of our quality assurance and continuous improvement system.

GETTING THE MEASURES RIGHT

To a certain extent, reporting against performance indicators at local, state and national levels is constrained by the performance indicators imposed by funding bodies and training authorities. However, it is useful to question why particular measures are used and to discuss ways in which to obtain more appropriate indicators of an RTO's performance.

Perhaps the most obvious example is that of measuring course completions as opposed to module completions. The 1999 CIT Student Opinion Survey showed that 8% of all respondents intended

completing only some modules, rather than a qualification. In some discipline areas this was even higher, eg, 36% of respondents undertaking access education programs and 20% of respondents undertaking software development programs indicated they intended only completing some modules. Consequently, program completion rate is not necessarily a measure of students achieving the outcomes for which they enrolled.

The above example begs the question of what constitutes success anyway? For example, when students who did not complete modules were surveyed as to the reason why, about 30% indicated employment related reasons. In particular, students in areas such as kitchen duties and English language left the program as soon as they had obtained employment. The students had achieved the outcomes for which they enrolled (ie, employment), but because they did not complete an entire program or even some modules, they counted as non-completions.

When reporting against key performance indicators, there is often the temptation to report using one measure in isolation. For instance, to obtain an overall graduate satisfaction rating, the most obvious way is to use the responses to question 62R on the annual NCVER Student Outcomes Survey and calculate the percentage of graduates satisfied with their program of study. However, there are also a number of other indicators of a program's success (or otherwise) embedded in the data. These include: average weekly earnings; employment rates; relevance of program to employment; achievement of aims when enrolling; perception of tangible benefits arising from completion of the program; credit received for program when undertaking further study. These other measures may be a better indicator of a program's success and a client's satisfaction with the program than a general question with a 1 to 10 scale. The latter type of response may be subject to variations in perception from day to day.

For example, in the results foe the 1999 NCVER Student Outcomes Survey, CIT had a lower satisfaction rating from its graduates than the national average. However, when looking at other indicators, such as those listed above, CIT performed demonstrably better than the national average. This disparity in results could be explained when the demographics of CIT's student population were examined. For instance, CIT's students had a higher level of education prior to commencing their study, they received more recognition for their prior study and were more likely to be employed while studying than were students in the rest of Australia.

TOWARDS THE FUTURE

More providers are conducting surveys to inform policy and practice within their organisation and are now starting to accumulate longitudinal data from such surveys.

The next logical step is to use the accumulated data and information generated by the surveys to build appropriate models and frameworks upon which to base planning. The building of models and frameworks can also be broadened from the local institute into the wider VET sector with appropriate sharing and collating of information from RTOs.

In this way, broader patterns and trends in the VET sector can be examined in a more coherent fashion and knowledge about the sector can be generated in a strategic way. When this happens we will see a move from information management to knowledge management both within institutions and within the sector.

CONCLUSION

Provider based researchers undertaking surveys for institutional feedback and planning need to make effective use of existing data and be strategic in designing and administering additional information gathering tools. It is crucial that survey results be fed into the planning processes within RTOs and that current performance indicators be closely examined. Further, there is a strong need within the sector to more openly share the knowledge generated by institution based surveys and to move towards a model of knowledge management.