

Australian *Flexible Learning* Framework

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

Jumping hurdles: Overcoming the barriers of 'thin markets' and rural locations

Researcher: Georgina Cane

Executive Summary

Over time, Australian Local Government Training (ALGT), an industry-owned body which provides support and advice regarding national vocational education and training (VET) issues to the nation's third tier of government, has become increasingly aware of the difficulties involved in increasing the participation rate of Council employees in qualifications from the Local Government Training Package.

ALGT is also aware of the apparent contradictions to be found in this situation given Councils' generally high levels of commitment to skill development and the sector's clearly articulated need for an increasingly skilled workforce to meet the growing pressures experienced by Councils as their roles and community expectations grow. Previous work conducted by ALGT has identified that local government, in common with other smaller, niche markets, experiences difficulties associated with being a 'thin' market – which can be defined simply as a market with a small number of purchasers.

This research was geared towards:

- clarifying the nature of Councils' training experiences
- identifying the barriers (or hurdles) which work against the participation of Councils in VET and, in particular, their participation in industry specific training
- identifying strategies including flexible learning strategies which can be adopted to overcome the hurdles.

The research which involved the surveying of Councils and registered training organisations (RTOs) combined with in-depth case study interviews identified that:

- Regional and rural Councils do have a demonstrable commitment to training, including recognised training, but that more recognised national qualifications are drawn from other industries' training packages than from the Local Government Training Package.
- The diverse skill needs of the Council workforce makes it difficult for RTOs to identify and cost effectively deliver training to small groups of trainees.
- Councils prefer workplace delivered and workplace relevant training.
- The geographic spread and remoteness of many Councils makes the cost of servicing them problematic for many RTOs.
- 50% of all regional and rural Councils have difficulty in finding an RTO who can deliver the required training to them.
- The lack of nationally and publicly available learning and assessment resources that support local government training is a major cost barrier that makes it not cost-effective for RTOs to service the market.

Finding solutions to these issues is, of course, complex and difficult. The solutions, however, appear to rest in the formation of partnerships between clusters of regional Councils and RTOs with the intent of delivering a 'critical mass' of trainees, so that RTOs are able to achieve the economies of scale necessary within their current funding models. The pragmatic realisation that training cannot be delivered to very small numbers of workers, in a way which is affordable to either the provider or the client, is central to the finding of workable solutions.

The role of resource development which supports flexible delivery is also central to the problem – and most difficult to resolve.

It is apparent that the propensity for RTOs to deliver 'generic' business and administration qualifications to Councils, rather than industry specific training, is driven as much by the ready availability of resources as by the career pathway benefits of these qualifications over those of industry-specific qualifications.

The report concludes with recommendations that address matters which fall within the province of the Commonwealth, States and Territories, industry and RTOs.

Recommendations

Recommendation

Action by:

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| 1. Local Government industry associations and bodies actively foster the participation of Councils and RTOs in regional networks to identify Councils' skill development needs and negotiate workable delivery solutions | Local Government Industry Associations and Bodies |
| 2. Local Government industry associations and bodies actively foster the development of annual training plans for all staff by Councils so that an orderly approach can be adopted to the development of workforce skills | Local Government Industry Associations and Bodies |
| 3. Local Government industry associations and bodies promote the value of the allocation of, at least, a dedicated part time training officer for all Councils employing more than 50 people and that, for smaller Councils, a senior staff member be assigned this responsibility | Local Government Industry Associations and Bodies |
| 4. ALGT, and other Local Government industry associations and bodies, increase and target effort to raise the awareness of regional and rural Councils to the availability and benefits of the new Local Government Training Package and escalate the debate within the industry of the relative merits of broadly-based, or generic, training and industry-specific training | ALGT |
| 5. Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and, post July 2005, the Ministry for Vocational and Technical Education within the Department of Education, Science and Training invest in the development of flexible resources to support the skill development of Councils with, in particular, an emphasis on the skills required by the | ANTA and, post July 2005, the Ministry for Vocational and Technical Education within the |

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<p>workforce to engage with communities, support community development and address immediate skill shortages such as planning and land management and environmental health services.</p>	<p>Department of Education, Science and Training</p>
<p>6. In order to better assess the training profile and experience of the local government industry, that ANTA and its successor, together with the State and Territory Training Authorities and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) modify their data collection methods to track and record the enrolment and completion rates of the employees of Council irrespective of whether the enrolled qualifications are drawn from the Local Government Training Package or from other industry training packages</p>	<p>ANTA, State and Territory Training Authorities, NCVER</p>
<p>7. The State and Territory Training Authorities, in conjunction with the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework), invest in a specific professional development strategy for RTOs to assist with the development of skills in identifying and creatively addressing the skill development needs of thin and non-traditional markets</p>	<p>State and Territory Training Authorities</p>
<p>8. RTOs, supported by the State and Territory Training Authorities, revisit their funding and charging models to make explicit those areas which will be supported with public funding and those which will require fee-for-service payments.</p>	<p>RTOs</p>
<p>9. State and Territory Training Authorities provide specific funding, in support of RTOs and their initial market establishment costs, when it is demonstrated that delivery to a niche or thin market is moving from 'generic' training to industry-specific training.</p>	<p>State and Territory Training Authorities</p>
<p>10. State and Territory Training Authorities, responsible for the establishment of RTO registration processes, put in place funding models which do not act as a disincentive for RTOs to include in their scope of delivery qualifications which may only receive relatively small enrolments. Such funding models should actively encourage the inclusion of qualifications from niche industries and thin markets by reducing the costs to RTOs rather than encouraging RTOs to rationalise their scope to only include large and mass-market programs.</p>	<p>State and Territory Training Authorities</p>

An initiative within the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000-2004