

The Role of Vocational Education and Training in Engaging Communities

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Abstract

A case study of CareerLink, a local community partnership that incorporates Vocational Education and Training (VET), provides a successful working model that benefits both the individual and the community. A collaborative partnership involving a group of schools and industry in a region located in Sorrento, Perth, Western Australia, incorporates nationally accredited training delivered by registered training organisations, which enable students to be well prepared for active citizenship. The social justice aspect in promoting active citizenship through VET skills development is explored.

Studies conducted by the Australian National Centre for Vocational Education Research have identified that community partnerships are generally formed to address local issues. Enacted social partnerships support the function within the community. VET has been characterised by both community and enacted social partnerships, which are constructed in a way to support vocational learning through a range of diverse initiatives. Social partnerships contribute to broader objectives aimed at strengthening communities by building relationships, working productively with a diversity of partners and enhancing capacity for local governance.

Consideration of the role of VET in social partnerships has proven to be helpful in addressing the needs of young people and communities in developing a culture of lifelong learning, which fosters sustainability in the long term. Learning has been viewed as a productive means of dealing with rapid change in the social and economic context by actively pursuing initiatives including securing employment, developing new skills and creating viable enterprises that provides greater security and potential for independence.

Keywords

Vocational Education and Training, partnerships, human work, engaging communities, lifelong learning, building community capacity

Introduction

In exploring the role of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in building community capacity, research conducted both globally and within Australia provides the basis for discussion. The

social partnerships that engage communities through vocational education demonstrate the impact that this form of learning has on the general community. Studies conducted in Australia are explored to demonstrate the role that VET plays in enacted social partnerships. Evidence suggests that social partnerships contribute to broader objectives that strengthen communities by building relationships, working productively with a diversity of partners that enhance capacity for local governance. The case study involving the CareerLink project, a local community partnership supported by the Department of Education Science and Training, outlines the model that incorporates a range of partnerships including industry, schools and training organisations.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report (2001) titled 'The well-being of nations: The role of human and social capital', outlines the role of human and social capital. According to the report, human capital is the knowledge and skills derived from education, training and experience and considered a most valuable resource. The notion of social capital refers to social relationships, behavioural norms and mutual trust evident in social and economic enterprise. The skills and attributes, according to the OECD report, identify human capital as knowledge, skills and attributes including perseverance. Investment in the human capital from the individual's perspective generates an economic benefit as the potential for employment rates of return and earnings are increased according to research (OECD 2001). The key performance indicators include education levels and, more specifically, the measures of human capital including numeracy and literacy. As a consequence, the benefits for individuals are transposed into benefits to the general economy. In principle, the collective economic impact can be measured as the rate of economic growth; however, in practice, this is a difficult exercise to accurately verify (OECD 2001). Recent OECD research confirms that with every additional year of education, results on average an increase in output per capita between four and seven per cent.

The OECD study reports that human capital has a range of non-economic benefits that relate to the level of education. The results include an improvement in health as an additional year of schooling reduces cigarette consumption by 1.1 for women and 1.6 for men. Evidence from the OECD report shows that with increasing levels of education, people seem to be happier. The parental role-modelling effect of education is a key to the levels of education of the next generation, as the study proves that children of parents with a certain level of education emulate similar levels of education. Similarly, the study shows that people are more likely to be involved in civic activities within the community including volunteering and charity giving and a lower risk of criminal activity.

The definition of social capital varies with researchers, according to the OECD study. Generally it seems that it is taken to include the networks, norms, values and understanding that encapsulates cooperation within or among groups. It is somewhat distinguished, however, from formal political, institutional and legal arrangements, which have a complementary role in the process. The assessment of social capital within the community and the access to capital from an individual's perspective can be measured through participation rates in associational life and levels of trust (OECD 2001). Interestingly, according to OECD studies, a decline in social capital in the United States and Australia and a mix of trends in other OECD countries are evident. Reasons for the trend in the United States are attributed to the propensity for young people in the present generation, compared to older generations to engage in longer periods of time spent watching television. This factor effectively reduces available time for social interaction.

The research conducted demonstrates social capital and access to such capital results in several factors being beneficial to the community. These include citizens enjoying improved health and wellbeing; better care of children as the social connectedness of mothers shows that the risk of child abuse and social problems within families are reduced; trust within the community results in lower crime rates; and the outcome of higher levels of trust and engagement within regions or states results in better quality government according to the OECD report. The consequential effect in the community is linked to economic activity, as the social networks result in several benefits, which include: assisting people to find jobs; trust influences confidence in the economy and use of credit; cohesiveness within organisations is linked to output and hence profitability; and at a regional level, clusters of innovative industries depend on local social networks that circulate implied knowledge (OECD 2001).

Social partnerships are attracting a growing interest in Australia and in various parts across the globe according to studies by Seddon and Billett (2004). The value of social partnerships are being acclaimed as a basis for building social capital, by various governments and global agencies including the OECD, and civic organisations such as Oxfam. Drawing upon the skills and networks from the collective, civic activities results in the building of stronger communities (Seddon et al. 2004).

The common make up of social partnerships include government, social agencies and communities or a combination of these groups (Seddon et al. 2004). Focussing on the context of education, the social partnerships provide learning experiences outside the confines of school in vocational colleges and workplaces. Citing the case study of CareerLink secondary school students, they are provided the opportunities of learning within the traditional classroom, together with attendance at the registered training organisation facility through standalone VET courses in

a range of more than twenty areas, coupled with an industry work placements. The range of outcomes result in students attaining recognition on the Western Australian Certificate of Education for the academic studies at the school, the units of competency forming the Certificate course together with acknowledgement of work placements through the accredited subject Structured Workplace Learning. The role of VET local community partnerships such as CareerLink, play an important role in building community capacity as they engage students in a range of learning experiences to gain accreditation for secondary graduation.

The report titled Social Partnerships in Vocational Education relating to building community capacity (Seddon et al. 2004) identifies that, within Australia, resources are being invested in funds into a range of social partnerships including health, community, regional and rural development, welfare support and education and training. The drive is the harnessing of a whole of government approach to regional policy-making and service delivery and the promotion of inter-agency cooperation in encouraging building community capacity.

According to Seddon et al. (2004) social partnerships enhance regional and local capacity for addressing such societal problems including community breakdown, unemployment and social exclusion. Given the regionalised focus, the solutions to the problems are generally more in keeping with local issues and acceptable to those interests. These social partnerships are beneficial in addressing the needs of young people in addition to sustaining communities which depends on establishing a culture of lifelong learning. The significance of lifelong learning is seen by Seddon et al. (2004) as a means of dealing with rapid social and economic change and the active pursuit of initiatives such as job seeking, skills development and establishing viable enterprises. These are viewed as essential for members of society to be active and independent citizens engaged in employment or self-employment.

Research conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Seddon et al. 2004), ascertains that VET is an important influencer in strengthening local communities. The sector, which supports industry, individuals and communities, has a longstanding role in the development of skills and attitudes within the workplace. In meeting the needs of those at risk, VET is considered a 'second chance' opportunity for those who have been unsuccessful at school or university (Seddon et al. 2004).

The National Training Strategy for VET 2004–2010 outlines a rigorous commitment to the role of building 'strong and sustainable communities' (Noonan et al. 2004, pp. 42-5). The expanding role of VET signals the concept of the role of VET into the broader community and social development including industry and workforce skills. Furthermore, community building is identified as one of

the four key objectives of the Australian National Training Authority national strategy (Seddon et al. 2004) as:

“Communities and regions will be strengthened economically and socially through learning and employment. This will mean: integrated learning and employment solutions will support regional economic, social, cultural and environmental development. Vocational education and training’s contribution to sustainable regions will involve linking skills to local employment, stimulating an interest in learning and strengthening TAFE [technical and further education] and other providers to partner with local agencies, businesses and industry clusters. Vocational education and training will help communities deal with change and take advantage of opportunities for growth” (ANTA 2003 cited in Seddon et al. 2004).

A study conducted by Seddon et al. (2004) identified community partnerships, which develop from community concerns and commitments and are derived to address the local issues or problems. Enacted social partnerships are generally initiated by agencies external to local communities with a view to supporting particular functions within the community. According to the study, it is evident that a blend of community and enacted social partnerships are constructed in a number of ways to support vocational learning, through a range of diverse local initiatives. As a result, social partnerships involving a range of partners are found to contribute to the broader objectives aimed at strengthening communities by building relationships resulting in enhanced capacity for local governance. In relation to the aspect of partnerships, the characteristic of capacity building has been defined as:

“Capacity-building: learning and development enhance ‘the ability of individuals and organisations, or organisational units, to perform functions effectively, efficiently and sustainable’ (United Nations Development Program 1997, p.5). Such capacity-building increases individuals’ potential for action and participation in local governance. It enables men and women to effect positive changes in their lives, to become active decision-makers in their local contexts. They become ‘actors’ who can make a difference in everyday affairs rather than being passive subjects within social and institutional processes”

(Eade 1997; Walters 2003 cited in Seddon et al. 2004, p. 11).

The range of partnerships relating to VET are seen to be a subset of a range of social partnerships and are evident as self-organised and organised initiatives according to Seddon et al. (2004). The CareerLink case study is an example of a VET in Schools initiative involving a group of Catholic and independent schools in the northern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia <<http://www.careerlink.net.au>>. The background of the student group include a combination of those from rural and remote areas, non-English speaking backgrounds, schools from a base of low socio-economic and high socio-economic backgrounds, students with disabilities and those at

risk of not completing their secondary education. Based at Sacred Heart College, Sorrento, the secretariat comprises five staff who liaise with the member schools and teachers in coordinating the VET and workplace learning pathways for 500 students in Year 10, 11 and 12. Liaison between the schools and industry work placements is orchestrated by regular visits to schools and students in the workplace through scheduled meetings, interviews and site visits. The students are assigned to the case manager who liaises with the student, parents, schools and host employer. Progress assessments provide feedback from the training course and host employer to the schools who include the information in the school reports to parents.

In providing a broad range of industry training courses, networks with training providers include TAFE Colleges, private training organisations, group training companies and industry-based host employers. The cluster arrangement involving ten schools enables students within each school to avail themselves of the comprehensive range of courses including Automotive, Beauty Retail Cosmetic Assistant, Business, Construction, Community Services (Child Care and Aged Care), Electrotechnology, Engineering, Electrical, Conservation and Land Management, Hospitality (Operations and Kitchen Operations), Information Technology, Leadership, Multimedia (General and Film and Television), Retail Operations, Sport & Recreation, and Tourism.

The CareerLink project is currently in the eighth year of operation and has expanded the range of industry training options for students since foundation. The most recent initiative is the development of Stage I and Stage II courses, which have the potential to progress students from a Certificate II in Year 11, to a Certificate III level in the subsequent year as a Year 12 student. Potentially this enables students to complete their secondary education together with a Certificate III level nationally accredited training course, which combines structured work placements with host employers. Outcomes for students demonstrate a success rate of around 86 per cent of all students completing the entire certificate course, with the balance achieving several units of competency. Public acknowledgement of student achievements are celebrated through a graduation and awards ceremony that provides recognition of outstanding achievement and endeavour.

The significance of the development of the CareerLink partnership is the building of relationships that have developed between the various stakeholder groups. The values and ideology of the group of schools share a common vision and objectives based on Christian values. As school leavers, students are armed with the potential to be active citizens engaged in further education and training or employment. The importance of preparing young people for engagement in society through partnerships such as CareerLink can be related to the social question relating to human work.

According to the papal document *Laborem Exercens – On Human Work* (Pope John Paul II 1981, p. 3), the issue of work is considered the essential key to a person's wellbeing. Furthermore, the document outlines that the fundamental dimension of our existence on earth is considered to be work. The aspects of science that attest to this importance and study devoted to the study of man include the disciplines of anthropology, paleontology, history, sociology, psychology, etc. This factor bears witness to the premise that the activity of work is critical for living a fulfilling life.

The basis for the conviction that work is fundamental to our purpose is found in the book of Genesis, which provides a conviction that “work is a fundamental dimension of human existence on earth” (Pope John Paul II, 1981, p. 4). Furthermore, the analysis of human work concerning the dominion over the earth contained in *Laborem Exercens* (Pope John Paul II, 1981, p. 7) goes to the essence of the ethical and social question, which is suggested should be the basis of social and economic policy within individual countries, internationally, and inter-continental relationships. Based on the personal benefits to the individual, work is considered a good thing for Man as it corresponds to a person's dignity, which expresses and promotes this dignity (Pope John Paul II 1981, p. 9). In summing up the ethical meaning of work according to the encyclical letter (Pope John Paul II 1981), work is considered a good thing for man and his humanity as, through this activity, work transforms nature and adapts it to his own needs. In doing so, the person is able to achieve fulfilment as a human being and accordingly becomes “more a human being” (Pope John Paul II 1981, p. 10).

The notion of real work situations are presented to students enrolled in CareerLink. They are provided with an opportunity to trial work placements incorporated with nationally accredited training. The primary focus is on developing industry specific skills in a range of fields of endeavour. The host employers reciprocate the work trial situation by offering traineeships or employment, should the arrangement be mutually agreeable. It is concluded from anecdotal evidence that a growing rate of successful outcomes for students include being actively engaged in forms of further training, education and employment. Recent research (Polesel et al. 2004; Malley 2001; KPA Consulting 2003; Barnett and Ryan forthcoming; Ryan 2002) cited in Woods (2005) has identified a range of benefits resulting from students undertaking VET as part of the secondary certificate. As outlined in the NCVET report (Woods 2005) these outcomes include:

- increased maturity, independence and motivation of students
- increased opportunities to widen careers options and obtain workplace experience
- reduced absenteeism from school
- improved learning at school
- improved management in school of diversity in student ability and post-school aspirations (Woods 2005, p. 4).

Woods (2005) suggests that further research would involve the tracking of the destinations of young people in the age bracket 15 -24 years, in order to provide a clearer picture of the success of school VET partnerships. This research data would provide detailed longitudinal information for the CareerLink partnership as the historical foundation has now been developed since its inception several years ago.

Exploration of the role of VET in engaging communities has centred on the CareerLink case study, a Local Community Partnership based in Sorrento, Perth, Western Australia. Research conducted both internationally and nationally throughout Australia attest to the contribution of social partnerships that contribute to the strengthening of communities. These involve building relationships within the community in meeting the needs of key stakeholders.

Consideration of the social justice aspect of preparing young people for the world of work refers to the papal document *Laborem Exercens*, based on the precepts dating back to the biblical times in the book of Genesis. The benefits to students and those involved in VET demonstrate meaningful outcomes in building community capacity. Research has concluded that developing a culture of lifelong learning, fosters sustainability in the long term. The conclusion that the promotion of learning as a viable means of dealing with rapid change provides the requisite foundation in securing employment, training and the basis for independence in society.

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