BEST PRACTICE ASSOCIATED WITH ‘CLUSTERS’
IN ADULT, COMMUNITY AND FURTHER EDUCATION IN VICTORIA

Rosalind Hurworth

Address: Centre for Program Evaluation,
Faculty of Faculty of Education,
The University of Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, AUSTRALIA
Email: r.hurworth@unimelb.edu.au
Phone: (03) 8344 849
BEST PRACTICE ASSOCIATED WITH ‘CLUSTERS’
IN ADULT, COMMUNITY AND FURTHER EDUCATION IN VICTORIA

ABSTRACT

This paper examines a Victorian Government initiative for the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACE) sector termed ‘Clustering’. This was instigated to strengthen the provision of adult and lifelong learning. Proving successful, an evaluation, was commissioned to determine best practice in relation to sustaining such Clusters.

CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT

‘Clustering’ arose from the Victorian State Government’s desire to foster infrastructure development and capacity in rural Victoria. Initially 58 Clusters of ACE organisations were funded in 2000 and by 2003, there were 75.

These Clusters were never intended to be solely geographical groupings but could be formed around a common need, type of clientele or program focus. As a result Clusters have arisen based on: geography (this is the most common basis for a Cluster); a theme (such as a providing IT support or distance education); a need for better marketing; a need to streamline administration and data collection; and career guidance or training needs.

Early Projects Associated with Clusters

Since the inception of Clusters, studies about implementation have included a study of how U3As have responded to the initiative (Hurworth et al, 2001) and an overall evaluation of the early stages undertaken by RMIT University’s Post Compulsory Education & Training Research Centre (2002).

Current Evaluation Purposes
In January 2003, the Centre for Program Evaluation (CPE) at The University of Melbourne was commissioned to identify how certain ACE Clusters have been effective in being able to enhance the capacity of member ACE organizations. The focus was to:

- Detect how the implementation of successful ACE Clusters has led to improvements in ACE practice and any benefits which have eventuated
- Elicit effective practice elements that might prove useful for other Clusters and for ACFE Regional Offices which administer Clusters.
- Outline strategies for encouraging uptake of new or extended Clusters.

**Evaluation Design**

The evaluation comprised a three-stage data collection approach that was carried out between March-May, 2003. The stages involved: telephone interviews with representatives from each of the nine ACFE Regional Offices; a mailed survey of open-ended questions to all 75 Clusters; and an in-depth interview with representatives from a sample of 20 Clusters reported to be successful about how their success was achieved. The design was then strengthened by including two negative cases (i.e. investigating why certain Clusters were not operating optimally). This process led to 22 Clusters (approx 30%) being selected from the 75 for more intensive study..

Questions covered: features of successful Clusters; how positive outcomes are achieved; benefits of Clusters; factors affecting Clusters; effective ways to introduce new members to an existing Cluster; ways to get Clusters to cooperate; and what makes for effective Regional management.

All qualitative data collected was displayed on matrices of the type suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Such displays allow for common themes to be extracted and for important quotes to be recorded. They are a particularly rigorous way of dealing with such data.

**FINDINGS**

**The Benefits of Clustering**

There were a number of perceived benefits of clustering. These included:

- a reduced sense of isolation for member organisations
- individual member organisations feeling stronger and more empowered to make decisions
• growth of positive sentiments concerning the Cluster and its future directions.
• increased opportunities for professional and personal development of Cluster staff.

Furthermore, a number of Clusters reported increased opportunities for gained through increased efficiencies and improved processes within a Cluster. As part of this, sharing of courses across Clusters and Regions has sometimes resulted in the possibility of increased course offerings for clients so that: “Our program guide covers all courses across the Region. Thus learners can move across providers” (Waterwheel) As a result, broader offerings have been possible. With others it has led to rationalisation so that outcomes have resulted in “…less duplication of courses, a wider variety of courses and greater accessibility by clients to training” (Melbourne Aboriginal).

Moreover, Clusters have provided benefits for learners through:
• Better access generally (by offering broader, more professional advertising and promotion; high quality brochures; and materials produced especially for CALD populations)
• Improved access to equipment and other resources
• Broader offerings (including training) through shared tutors
• Better linkages through articulated programs and pathways (within and beyond the Cluster).

**Indicators of Cluster Effectiveness**

Respondents stated that: **A CLUSTER IS RUNNING EFFECTIVELY IF:**

1. **There is a strong, comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding**

2. **Clusters are Managed Well**

Within this factor it was seen to be important that the lead agent remains strong, while simultaneously fostering transparent and democratic management procedures.

Lead agents are required to administer funds as part of the Clustering agreement with ACFEB. With regard to the lead agent and their relationship with other Cluster member groups, it was said that Clusters work most effectively if:
• there is a firm lead agent that acknowledges the importance of all members
• even though there is a nominated lead agent, great involvement of all members of the Cluster still occurs
• no individual member organisation feels isolated.
• However, it seems that if the lead agent provides fairly strong leadership, then a Cluster is more likely to be effective.

3. Investments are made in fostering good communication

Good communication was seen to be central to Cluster success although it was seen to be easier in smaller Clusters and established groups. Some particular strategies found to be successful included:

• Ensuring that clear and concise information is passed on to members regularly
• Providing documentation, including agendas, minutes and emails in a timely fashion
• Delegating tasks in line with abilities whilst respecting values and differences
• Outlining roles and responsibilities clearly
• Making time to contribute
• Being honest and up-front
• Discussing issues while ensuring that discussion doesn’t go beyond the Cluster.

4. There are regular, well-organised and effective meetings

Meeting face-to-face was seen to be an important avenue through which to communicate and so the common view was to; “participate in all meetings where possible to ensure communication and sharing of resources” (Careers Guidance).

Another general opinion was that Clusters should not expect to have too many meetings so that once or twice a term should suffice. It was also suggested that for optimal effectiveness Clusters should:

• Allocate funds for providers to attend meetings
• Decrease travel by rotating venues (which has an added benefit of seeing each other’s operations and contexts) or meeting centrally.
• Meet at mutually agreeable times (e.g. one group had breakfast meetings)
• Ensure all have input into the agenda
- Empower attendees to make decisions on a provider’s behalf.
- Allow participants to take turns in chairing meetings.
- Create a task list after each meeting.
- Photocopy notes and task list for all organisations involved.
- Distribute tasks equitably among member organisations.

5. There is a genuine desire to work together to create a common vision

This involves;

- A genuine belief in working towards the needs of the Cluster members
- A keen desire to network, share and collaborate
- A need to develop a shared vision and spirit of cooperation.

Several effective clusters also managed to develop understandings over a relatively short time frame through the use of external facilitators or through existing skills residing within the Cluster. Very small Clusters seemed able to develop these understandings rapidly without formal processes and move onto action quickly, once they had formed a common focus.

6. Trust is built up between Cluster member organizations

Trust was said to be established through:

- Developing knowledge of Cluster members via extensive dialogue from the outset
- Participating jointly in professional and skill development

7. There has been effective planning

where:

- There is a strong strategic plan
- Work plans are carried out
- Time has been factored into planning

8. Finances have been managed well

For effectiveness, trust, transparency and equity were seen to be important factors. In many smaller Cluster members were quite happy for the lead agent to hold and allocate
funds as they, themselves either; “don't have the systems or don't want to manage money” (Moonee Valley). Not surprisingly, effective Clusters were also perceived to be those that: remain within budget and spend the money appropriately.

9. A Project Worker Can Be Employed
Five out of the 22 clusters indicated that they employed ‘Cluster workers’. These seemed to have been particularly effective. Indeed one Cluster described their worker as ‘the hub of the Cluster’ while those without workers often found it difficult to find time to carry out Cluster work. However, in smaller Clusters there sometimes had to be a realistic trade-off between being big enough to employ someone and the potential benefits.

10. There is Capacity Building Through Funded Professional Development or Specific Learning
Clusters seem to be most effective when professional development is provided for Cluster members/staff. Ways this has been achieved have been through:

• use of external facilitators
• running programs on the Australian Quality Training Framework,
• expecting that member providers would engage in extensive TAFE training (Careers Guidance).
• Clusters facilitate on-the-job learning through both informal sharing and more formalised professional development

However, it was pointed out that optimal learning could only occur if funding is available to build up the skills of both coordinators and tutors. For example, in one case funding enabled a facilitator to provide training for the entire Cluster.

Sharing also arose from the diverse experience base of the group. For example, few of those interviewed had formal qualifications in education but some had skills in small business and community development while others possessed specialist skills such as working with disability, youth, ethnic or Koori groups. Such skills have often been passed on. Thus clustering has provided an effective vehicle for the induction of novices into the sector. Although informal support existed in the past, both ‘old hands’ and beginners indicated clustering had made handing on knowledge more efficient. Therefore, many Clusters stated that smaller providers attained their skills ‘on the job’.
11. There are economies of scale
This occurs when:
• resources and equipment are shared
• there is a greater range of tutors available than would have been otherwise and so a greater range of courses can be offered.

12. There is strong promotion of the Cluster across the local community
It seems essential to effective practice that Clusters:
• maintain a strong profile in the Community
• produce a good course guide, particularly one that covers all Regional providers.

13. Aims have been met
This has been achieved when:
• all aims and objectives have been fulfilled but particularly when;
• classes and courses are full and there is plenty of return business.

Indeed, some Clusters reported that through consolidation of Clusters across a Region, some classes are filled before they are even advertised.

14. There is ongoing concern regarding efficiency, accountability and improvement
The current ACE Cluster program is focussed on the areas of quality assurance and enhancement of ACE programs and services. According to the initial survey data from all Clusters, quality assurance, mostly in the form of AQTF, has been carried out by about 30% of clusters. Thus many Clusters are yet to engage in such activities.

Strategies to enhance efficient accountability, have included:
• Delegating responsibility to the lead agent or others with appropriate skills
• Developing processes for reporting up front, including acquiring compatible software
• Providing training for employees and committees of management on ACFEB accountability processes.

Other ways that Clusters have managed effective performance has been by Implementing the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and ongoing evaluation.

15. There is a good relationship with Regional Offices of ACFE

It seemed that the most successful Cluster-Regional Office relationships were when workers from these Offices made themselves available for interpreting guidelines, offered assistance and facilitated professional development but were not overly prescriptive or demanding and recognised some problems with systems.

The Inclusion of New Members

Induction of a new member in the existing Cluster has been a common experience with several Clusters undergoing this process currently. In order for this to be achieved successfully, Clusters realised that it was important to develop understandings and have shared vision and philosophy.

Strategies that were said to ease induction include:
• Ensuring the new member is proactive and compatible
• Looking for what the new member can add to the Cluster
• Delineating expectations clearly
• Ideally integrating the new provider at the start of planning for an ensuing year.

• Induction kits or orientation manuals (WALTAD, Latrobe and Careers Guidance)
• A well-developed MOU (Waterwheel).

• Strong professional development support, including allocation of a mentor (Latrobe)
• Personal support; through making people welcome and inviting them to meetings before joining.
• Engaging with the Committee of Management as well as with the Coordinator
• Setting aside times at meetings to share information both ways
• Ensuring the new member has the same finance and reporting platform.

Conclusion

Clusters are now past their establishment phase. After three years of operation ACE Clusters have set up various ways to co-operate amongst the member organisations, and with many Regional Councils. Therefore, a key characteristic of the sector is the strong framework for co-operation that has developed. Part of the success lies in having provided both structure and flexibility simultaneously. In addition they seem to have demonstrated many of the effectiveness criteria outlined above.

References


Hurworth, R and Harvey, G. (2001) U3A Network-Vic accommodation and Clusters options (ACO) project. Vol 1: Profile of Universities of the Third Age (U3As) and the potential for Clustering arrangements. Report for ACFE. University of Melbourne: Centre for Program Evaluation

