

**LIFELONG LEARNING: SHARED RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH
ENTERPRISING LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS**

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ABSTRACT

Working in partnership with local business, Douglas Mawson Institute of Technology (DMIT) in Adelaide South Australia, has been trialling an integrated enterprise learning model to provide a bridge from the simulated business environment of Practice Firms to the real world of Business Incubators. It is built on the premise that Vocational Education and Training (VET) can contribute significantly to economic and social development through both skills development and sustaining learning pathways throughout life.

INTRODUCTION / FRAMEWORK

While it is generally agreed that Enterprise Education should underpin both compulsory and post-compulsory education, research is increasingly showing that it is the environments in which people learn as much as what they learn which promotes and encourages lifelong learning.

Learning, as we know, does not just happen through educational institutions, but occurs in a range of environments from the family to the community to the workplace. The challenge is to facilitate and provide meaningful and attractive pathways and linkages between those environments, and to do so in a way that is reflective of and compatible to the learner's lifestyle. As has often been said, we are all natural lifelong learners and learning is fundamentally a social and participatory activity. In this presentation we look at one way in which Vocational Education and Training can 'value-add' through its contribution to economic and social development in collaboration with local business which is supported and nurtured within its local community.

Commencing in the international arena of the **Practice Firms**, the learner develops an understanding of and practice in using basic business principles whilst enhancing their generic and employability skills. Through a bank of learning and realistic simulations they relate to real-world activities, participating nationally and, wherever possible, internationally in trading activities with other Practice Firms. This environment provides opportunities for both the delivery and assessment of generic and vocational competencies across a number of VET program areas.

Learners then move into a **Work Studio** where specialisation occurs, and models of work-based learning are facilitated in an atmosphere that enables industry networking, business development and, importantly, community interaction and involvement. To engender such an environment, the pilot program works closely with the local Chamber of Commerce and Business Enterprise Centre as well as the local Business Incubator in which the work studio is located. The Manager of the Incubator provides business mentoring to the Work Studio 'tenants'. Indeed, the **Business Incubator** may be the natural progression from the Work Studio if the learner wants to explore the option of developing a business plan for a small business.

METHODOLOGY

The Business Incubator

Small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) are often the entities where innovation begins. Identifying this through our local business and community involvement enabled us to acknowledge the need to strengthen these partnerships to refine skill development, promote innovation and maintain and develop our understanding of the evolving needs of the business community.

In 2003, DMIT was awarded an Australian Flexible Learning Framework (AFLF) New Practices Project – **PortAbility** to trial and develop a new learning environment for TAFE students within the Port Adelaide Business Incubator, Todd Street Chambers. The Incubator, home to approximately 30 small businesses with a mix of anchor or longer-term tenants and ‘starter’ businesses, is a National and International award winner, including the Minister’s Award for Outstanding Achievement 2002; Metro Incubator of the Year 2001; and the Business Incubator Association Outstanding Incubator Client, USA 2004. Mentoring services are provided to assist business owners through the difficulties that may be experienced in setting up and initially running their businesses. In Semester 2, 2003 DMIT (the students involved in the PortAbility project) became a tenant of the Todd Street Chambers with full access to its business mentoring and support services, largely provided through the Incubator Manager.

The Learners

Both within and beyond specific vocational pathways, employees and entrepreneurs now and in the future are those who can create, drive and implement ideas to enhance the economic and organisational performance of their business as well as contribute to the economic and social well-being and development of their community.

The **PortAbility** Project provided an opportunity for a small group of advanced-level students to experience an environment where support was specifically business focussed and learning/assessment from their specific vocational training was aligned to the business activities they would undertake. This was a big step for everyone, particularly the students, however we believed that this link with business enterprise established real and interactive business links and gave them a new option to consider that of pursuing their own business ideas and dreams.

Specifically, the new tenants were helped to identify a niche market within their chosen vocational pathway. They then set up and operated a simulated business that required them to initiate, generate and consolidate business activities. ‘**Creative Resolutions Enterprise Studio**’ was a dual business offering Tourism Marketing and IT Help Desk Support Services within both the Business Incubator and local community. The business operators experienced the same mentoring program that other incubated businesses experienced. They attended networking functions and liaised with other business operators who provided them with the business impetus to pursue their business objectives.

Developing initiative and creativity was one element of enhancing the employment and career options of our students. These elements of individual performance together with a number of other demonstrated *employability skills* are the personal abilities that enable a person to effectively **apply** their technical skills in the workplace (and life in general). Therefore a key component of our pilot project was to initiate the mapping of these skills as demonstrated through the vocational experiences of our students. As we experience the evolution of this Teaching and Learning methodology we are mindful of the acknowledged importance of *employability skills* as an outcome for our students. We are also aware that these enhanced personal abilities contribute to the economic and social development of both the community and the individual throughout life.

OUTCOMES

There is no doubt that DMIT has achieved greater profile, credibility and relevance within the local business community. Within the Vocational Education and Training sector there is renewed or perhaps refocussed interest in the Practice Firm methodology and the opportunities to build on this concept through variations of, or expansions to, the basic methodology and philosophy.

For the Learners

“The bumpy road to success” was how our students described their journey throughout the PortAbility project. Competency was achieved against all Employability Skills areas as each student was required to initiate and react to day-to-day business opportunities and problems.

Their experiences were not without frustrations, conflict within their team, reliability and responsibility issues, poor communication and initial differences on business practices and leadership roles. However, the “bumpy road” did end in success, and feedback showed that the students believed they did develop:

- greater personal and business confidence;
- an improved understanding of what customer service really means;
- business management skills in a real work environment;
- networking and business relationship skills;
- an opportunity to re-think their future directions in employment or self employment.

By the end of the project, most of the participating students wanted to go on to higher study, including four students who were also making plans, at varying stages, for starting their own business operation. One IT student is currently undertaking contract work with a number of the Incubator tenants while she builds up sufficient equity and hones her business and marketing plans to a point where she herself will become an Incubator tenant. We will continue to monitor the progress of these ‘first graduates’ from the incubator learning environment, particularly in relation to their business success and involvement in community activities.

For the DMIT Staff

Equally, staff experienced a ‘bumpy’ yet ultimately rewarding learning road through the project. Perhaps the hardest thing for the TAFE staff involved was to learn to step back and let the students get on with running their small business, mistakes and all. From having full responsibility for facilitating student learning, they experienced working in partnership with the incubator business community and sharing the responsibility for student learning with the Incubator Manager who was the students’ business mentor. Experientially, they realised that teaching skills and business skills are complementary in successful student learning, affirming the benefits of consistent, adequate and well-facilitated Practice Firm participation as an environment for business orientation.

For the Business Incubator Tenants

On completion of the New Practices project, those Incubator tenants who had accessed the services of **Creative Resolutions** were asked to provide feedback via a questionnaire to the project team. The General Manager of the Western Area Business Enterprise Centre who is located within Todd Street Business Chambers, was most positive in his comments regarding the mutual benefits of co-location to both Incubator tenants and students. Other tenants were equally supportive of the model, although they were able to suggest areas for improvement. In general, the tenants agreed that:

- They were able to provide the students with opportunities to work on real projects that were important to the development of their business, ie. there were practical and tangible benefits from their involvement. This was particularly so in regard to the IT students whose assistance in developing data bases, setting up effective file management systems, and designing and establishing websites was much appreciated.
- The students generally exhibited positive attitudes and good communication skills, but tended not to appreciate the sense of urgency and effective time management that needs to drive small business operations.
- Areas of student skills that need prior honing to maximise their Incubator experience include business needs analysis, pricing, costing and quoting, and business relationships development.
- Improved induction for tenants might include a tenants/TAFE staff seminar so that tenants have a better appreciation not just of the students’ background and skills, but also of the structure of the TAFE training they are undertaking and the competencies, which were being assessed.

For the Community

While the PortAbility project did not specifically set out to develop community links outside of the Business Incubator and associated business organisations, because of the nature of business and community interaction in the Port Adelaide area, the

project did develop some profile within the community and the local council has certainly been monitoring its progress. As well, the Tourism students who were part of the project did undertake work for 2 community clients who had attended the launch of the Creative Resolutions business.

More community organisations are becoming aware of the value of collaborative partnerships between the community, local business and their local vocational education and training providers. There is a new understanding and impetus that between these three sectors there is opportunity to develop integrated learning environments for learners at different stages of their lifelong learning journey.

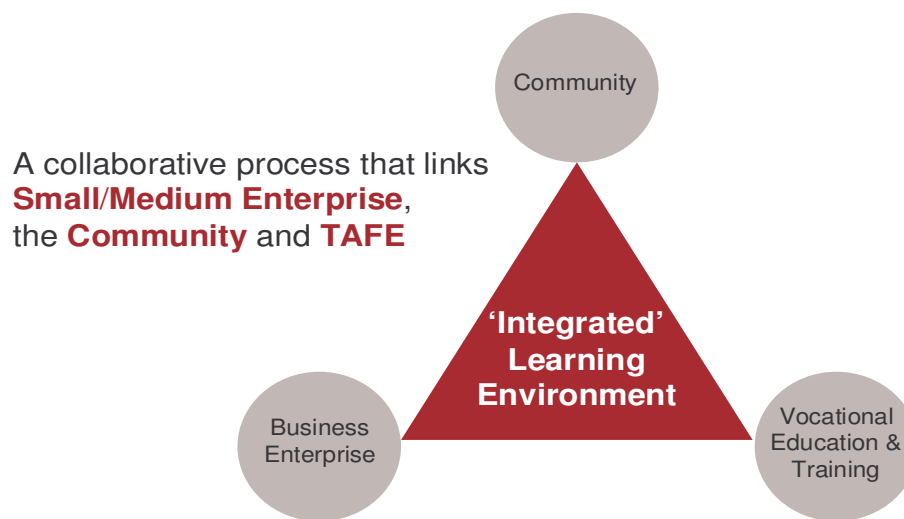


Figure 1 Integrated Learning Environment

CONCLUSIONS >>> and the Future!

Supporting business and community through student interaction not only develops stronger links between the training/learning environment and the community, but also introduces younger learners to the concept of community capacity building and how communities work. Through a closer working relationship with networked business and community structures, students learn to develop community relationships and are able to contribute more widely to the community as well as have the confidence to step outside the comfort zone of their learning environment or place of employment. The benefits to both business and the community, whilst initially seeming insignificant, can ultimately help to revitalise or reinvigorate a community through entrepreneurship in a variety of forms.

The PortAbility model has generated considerable interest in both state and national (and some international) forums. The further development of this integrated learning model is continuing in 2004 as follows:

- DMIT has won a 2004 State-funded **Innovation Initiative** project entitled *Integrated Business Partnerships in Training* to further develop and refine the methodology of the PortAbility project and broaden its applicability across other VET programs and Training Packages, particularly as an effective way of developing and assessing employability skills and providing meaningful vocational placement.
- A Professional Development strategy to induct other staff in effectively utilising this methodology is underway.
- A promotional strategy to small business, business associations and local councils has been developed by the Business Incubator Manager to publicise the value of the PortAbility model in better integrating business and training/learning.
- The applicability and value of the PortAbility model for priority or targeted groups such as Indigenous or disabled learners, young or mature learners, will be investigated.

The ultimate vision for DMIT is to create a ‘Greenhouse’ environment both off and on-campus, where incubation plays a major role in the agenda of VET whilst also meeting the more specific needs of business, communities, and the individual training needs of our clients. This vision has also required that we explore how our teaching practices need to adapt and change when collaborating with business partners in this new learning environment.

Our initial 2003 pilot, funded as part of ANTA’s Australian Learning Framework New Practices Projects, enabled us to reflect and then focus on how this new learning environment – the Work Studio, might enhance both the learning outcomes and employment opportunities for VET learners. We believe that this project will contribute towards a new era in learning, built on the premise that every individual, whatever their specific vocational agenda, will at some point in their lives be involved with a business, own a business or be part of a community using business practices. Thus this model not only provides a pathway for learners to broaden their employment opportunities, it also supports the notion of lifelong learning and community capacity building.

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