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Monday, May 17 2010

Are teachers the only source of future efficiencies in VET, asks John Mitchell.

The following article featuring Alan Manly, Managing Director of Group Colleges Australia (GCA) recently appeared in Campus Review.

ACPET thanks Dr John Mitchell and Campus review for permitting ACPET to publish the article in its entirety.



The recently announced review of the VET workforce by the Productivity Commission is a critical research project, and focuses on trainers and assessors. However, productivity also can be improved by improving management and administration systems and by implementing new business models, says Alan Manly, Managing Director of Group Colleges Australia (GCA).

As head of this ten-year old Sydney-based organisation enrolling over 4,000 mostly VET students per annum through its four colleges, Manly is focused on organisational efficiencies, and is not convinced he can extract more value from his teachers.

"Our board of directors observed many years ago that in education wages are about the same across the board. There's only so much you can do with teachers' wages. How do you make a teacher teach faster? Very hard. We like to think that we actually make the [productivity] gain in administration."

GCA's business model is unusual in that its small head office oversees four colleges: an English college Metro, a high school St James, a VET college Central and a higher education provider UIC. GCA's efficiencies are gained mostly from keeping lean that head office and related administration.

"We have one head office for several colleges. In the past we could grow and keep our head office costs down. That was our economic gain," said Manly.

How can educational organisations reduce administrations costs? "You'd

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better get to computers fast. You've got to remove the most expensive part of administration which is labour. So we have things online. As a private education institution we would probably have the most automated model of our private competitors. Basically we make our money out of investing in IT."

Some of that IT is used in the classroom and some in the provision of other services by GCA. "We have a strong emphasis of the use of technology. All classrooms have interactive white boards, courses are being taught using Moodle, we use [measurement] matrixes, and we have a constant review of service to all stakeholders - students, staff, agents and regulators.

"So it's about economies of scale and using technology. Our head office is quite lean. The entire place runs on very, very few human beings."

Reducing administration costs does not mean a reduction in services, says Manly, who came to education from the computer industry. "In the computer industry I used to be in charge of servicing major computer sites. Consequently I knew about post-sales service. [I learnt that] as a customer the only thing you'll be irritated about is when you don't get what you want or what you expected."

Hence GCA measures "the turn-around time of things such exam results, the length of queues at customer service counters, the waiting time for any request from students. GCA measures turn around time for any regulatory request for information. We have a constant review of all costs, and there are no holy cows.

"We actually monitor the queues with cameras. There are five screens in the Executive area. The Directors have screens in their rooms where they can monitor the queues downstairs."

The supply chain

Manly is also focused on efficiencies in terms of offering students the opportunity to stay with GCA from English language courses through to VET and higher education. He calls this the supply chain and he sees it as inefficient for GCA to educate an individual up to a certain point and then hand them over to another educational organisation.

"We've become more of a one stop shop. Our English language college augments the big Central College, and the Central College then feeds the UIC."

Not surprisingly, Manly believes that to stay successful GCA cannot only operate in the VET sector. "To be in the private education sector, to be successful you've got to be in higher ed."

One reason he gives is that the recent exposure of dodgy private providers demonstrated that higher education has what he calls "more logical education foundations". Another reason is that HE organisations are opening up VET colleges, extending their supply chain.

"Take Monash University, which now has Monash College. Well that [initiative] absolutely wipes out someone who cannot provide that supply chain."

Manly is also conscious that VET is being squeezed by schools who are retaining more students in Years 11 and 12 that might have previously enrolled in VET.

"So we're seeing high schools encroaching onto VET and we're seeing the HE people saying we can provide a diploma, so the [VET] guy in the middle is really under a lot of pressure."

Rather than be squashed in the middle, Manly is creating an efficient supply chain from "feeder colleges to diploma level education" and on to degrees. For Manly, developing this sustainable business structure is more important than increasing teacher efficiencies.



Contact [Alan Manly](#) and see www.gca.edu.au



Dr John Mitchell is a VET researcher. See www.jma.com.au



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