Project Report

2006 Victorian Equity Projects – An Office of Training and Tertiary Education initiative

Project title: ACE Supporting Sole Parents
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Project summary

Working with 9 other Adult Community Education providers, Coonara co-ordinated a project to increase the capacity of these ACE organisations to meet the current needs of sole parents moving into employment. In addition to general capacity building we skilled our trainers in careers guidance and developed a simple RPL/RCC tool for students.

The learners

Our identified target group was sole parents returning to work as a result of the welfare to work policies of the federal government. A study by the Brotherhood of St Laurence found that “sole parents are less likely to have post secondary education and may lack the qualifications for many jobs”. Sole parents constitute 22% of the general population. Across the ACE providers in our network sole parents range from 18 – 25% of current clients.

Eighty percent of sole parents are women – the core client group for ACE providers. Whilst this equity group has always been one of the traditional ACE client groups, enquiries to our ACE organisations and our consultation with other relevant agencies had indicated that the needs of clients in this equity group had changed as a result of government policies. No longer were these parents in a position to take time to consider their options for employment, easing their way back into the workforce with a limited amount of casual or part time work. There was a growing sense of urgency to gain employment as quickly as possible.

The challenge

According to the National Council of Single Mothers and Their Children Inc., sole mothers overall have lower levels of education than coupled mothers. The Council also states that single mothers require “genuine education/training… not just job search/voluntary work.” Moreover, “training
should make allowances for critical family events…sick children…court proceedings and the threat of domestic violence.”

We needed to increase our capacity to at least understand, if not meet, these needs. Most Adult Community Education providers in our network were small organisations with limited resources to provide the sort of return to work training that sole parents needed. However in most other respects ACE is exactly the right sort of environment for sole parents to build their return to work skills.

- We provide childcare for most classes.
- Our years of experience with women returning to learning, as a pathway to work, give us a great understanding of the barriers they face.
- We provide a safe, non-threatening environment for people who may have suffered trauma and stress and are hesitant to approach a larger training organisation.
- We are usually local and therefore more accessible, particularly in times of increased transport costs
- We have great networks and referral contacts with other relevant agencies such as community health, domestic violence agencies, counselling, etc.

We believed that a collaborative approach to planning and delivering training may enable us to better provide the training and careers guidance support that sole parents required.

Your approach

The first thing we did was to gather information about the Welfare to Work policy implications for sole parents. We obtained information from Centrelink and the National Welfare Rights Network about sole parent payments and social security requirements. We also built up an information kit for each provider in the network with information from agencies such as the Sole Parents Union. This information kit was as much about debunking myths about sole parents as about providing accurate information.

Quality careers guidance support was identified as a high priority for increasing our organisational capacity. Each member provider in our network selected at least one trainer to participate in a professional development activity to increase their skills in this area. These trainers completed a careers guidance unit from the Community Services Training Package that they can use as an imported unit for the Cert IV or Diploma of TAA.

We also developed an easy to ease RPL/RCC tool using PowerPoint. This tool is being used by trainers to assist groups of students to develop RPL/RCC applications within orientation sessions or return to study short courses as well as being used by individual students.

The results

Professional conversations facilitated to oversee the project activities were probably one of the most beneficial aspects of the project. Through these conversations we shared lots of information and ideas about our delivery of training to the sole parent equity group. One of the most valuable and successful results was the adoption of a collaborative approach to timetabling delivery of training. Training programs are now being staggered across providers with regular new intakes of students across our region. Active referral between providers and effective sharing of resources (including trainers) has meant that we are offering a more co-ordinated and accessible range of training options to our community.

Our network identified a need for better pathways into accredited training courses for many of the equity group students. To meet this need we have developed a trial project to deliver the Certificate
I in Vocational Preparation between four small providers in a defined geographic area in the Outer Eastern Suburbs using the scope of one larger provider. This collaborative approach to delivery has the following benefits:

- Access to training not otherwise available in smaller communities.
- The option for students to “fast track” and complete the full certificate in an accelerated time if they chose to study at more than one location.
- A greater range of electives for students to choose from.
- Increased viability for small providers to meet their commitment to delivery of funded hours.

This pilot was developed late within the Equity Project as something additional to our original plans and has not yet been completed. However enrolments to date have been very encouraging. Smaller providers have reported a marked increase in enrolments. We have also had a very positive response from employment agencies referring clients to the course.

Lessons learned

One of the main things that we learned was probably a reinforcement of what we already knew…. that you can’t predict an individual’s needs based on the fact that they belong to a certain equity group (sole parents, those with a disability, etc). We learned that many of the needs of the sole parent equity group are common to other learners. In many respects this has meant that in building our capacity to meet their needs for better careers guidance, assistance with recognition of current skills and greater access to appropriate training and support, we are also better meeting the needs of other learners in our community.

It has always been the ACE philosophy to meet the needs of individual learners within a supportive and inclusive environment. It was satisfying the complete a project focusing on a single equity group that actually reinforced this philosophy and reassured us that by building our capacity in any respect we can better meets the needs of our communities in general.

Contact details for queries regarding the project

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Product 1

Title Easy to Use RPL/RCC Tool

Blurb

The RPL/RCC tool was developed for Sole Parents, however it is applicable to other equity groups. The tool was developed in PowerPoint and contains a range of additional forms and instructions on word documents. The tool can be copied onto a CD format.