

Learning Locally

Better understanding the complexity and costs of service delivery in rural locations.

A report for the BSW ACFE Regional Council,
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Executive Summary

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1. Executive Summary

Learn Local Organisations (LLOs) located in rural and regional communities provide a vital service in supporting the most vulnerable learners in their communities, yet many of these organisations are becoming economically unviable. There is a tension between having an organisation that is commercially viable and one that sees its role as part of a wider community engagement model.

Project Purpose

This is the final report for the Barwon South-West Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Regional Council, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). It examined the issues regarding the complexities and costs of service delivery in rural locations and considered the recent closures or mergers of a number of LLOs. It reports on the findings and also makes recommendations for action to support LLOs located in regional and rural areas develop viable models of delivery to ensure they are able to support the most vulnerable learners in their communities.

The key research question was:

In the light of recent closures of a number of LLOs, how can LLOs located in regional and rural areas develop viable models of delivery to ensure they are able to continue to support the most vulnerable learners in their communities?

Supplementary questions:

What are the issues and how do they impact on regional and rural LLOs?

Is there a case for saying regional and rural LLOs should be treated differently?

Project Methodology

This project contained a number of different data collection methods. These included a survey of LLO Executive Officers; focus groups and individual interviews with stakeholders including learners; and desktop research of current literature, policies, case studies and existing practices in other locations state-wide, nationally and internationally.

Summary of key issues and findings

LLO Capacity

- Attracting suitable LLO Board members is an issue across the region, but is exacerbated in small communities.
- Competent governance is critical to ensure organisational viability.
- Continuous changes in funding arrangements are one of the key difficulties identified by BSW LLOs. The lack of predictability for organisations that operate on knife-edge margins makes their position precarious and this has an on-going deleterious effect on management and staff.
- LLOs play a vital role in communities (particularly more isolated communities), delivering and maintaining the wider benefits of learning, such as health, employment, social relationships. These services will be lost to a community if an LLO closes.
- Small LLOs are not RTOs, so partnerships must be developed or maintained with larger LLOs and other RTOs.
- Medium and large LLOs are more likely to be RTOs.
- RTO compliance was seen as a significant issue by the medium LLOs, taking up disproportionate amounts of money and time.
- LLOs were open to establishing new networks to share resources.
- LLOs are willing to participate in professional development but cost and location are barriers.
- Geography presents a challenge across all areas of an LLO's operation in BSW – for learners, Executive Officers and trainers to travel.

Competition

- Competition from RTOs and TAFE is a serious issue that impacts can lead to non-viable class sizes. The learners who take up the TAFE or RTO offers are not always adequately supported and consequently often unsuccessful.
- Both learners and non-LLO organisations don't have an appreciation of the value of pre-accredited learning. Marketing of what Learn Local is and its value to the community needs to be improved.

Learners

- The learners who participate in LLO classes are often challenging, coming from disadvantaged and disengaged backgrounds. No allowance in the funding structures is made for the LLO to provide the support that is needed by people from these backgrounds to successfully engage in education.
- Blended learning could be better used if technology was enhanced. However, the on-line component of blended learning can be challenging for learners who have poor or no access to the Internet, or who have poor digital literacy.

Data and planning

- The skilled use of evidence-based planning is uneven in the region.
- LLOs are receptive to better use of data related to business opportunities.

In summary

The small, rural LLOs in BSW are not operating on a level playing field. They do not have the infrastructure or training resources of private RTOs, TAFE or industry, yet they play a vital role in reaching and supporting vulnerable learners and provide a critical pathway to engagement in the community, to accredited training and future employment. As such, it is vital that these organisations are more appropriately resourced and supported to ensure that vulnerable learners in rural communities do not lose this valuable resource.

The recommended BSW ACFE Region Strategy

In order to ensure there are no more closures of Learn Locals so that the most vulnerable learners access pre-accredited training, these strategies are recommended:

1. Building expertise in running a community business;
2. Promoting and developing capacity-building partnerships;
3. Building technology expertise and infrastructure;
4. Building on-going professional development into the fabric of LLO operations;
5. Stabilising the funding environment.