Accessing Latent Care Industry Workforces for Western Victoria

Preliminary REPORT

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11th July 2024.

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Project overview

The objective of this initial research piece is to identify barriers impacting local people's engagement with TAFE level study to access careers in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) and community services, individual support and disability support industry sectors in the Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM).

With very low unemployment rates of 2.8 percent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, May 2024), the growth and development of rural communities in western Victoria is challenged by skilled workforce shortages across a range of sectors. However, the ECEC workforce has been one that has been identified as an enabling workforce that is critical to support broader career access and skilled workforce entry across a range of sectors (ByFive, November 2023).

To address this challenge, Federation University Australia's Future Regions Research Centre (FRRC), Federation TAFE and Wimmera Southern Mallee Development (WSMD) have partnered to identify and engage with people living in the region who have an interest in engaging with further study but have been unable to do so. The research is focussed on both documenting the reasons that have prevented study and working with the project partners (Federation TAFE and WSMD) to develop pilot programs that reduce or remove these barriers where possible, facilitating an entry into training, and engagement with the workforce.

Priority areas the research and intervention model have sought to address have included:

1. Identifying key cohorts of people in the region recognised as having lower rates of workforce participation (but not necessarily characterised as unemployed) i.e., women in the 25 – 44 year age group.
2. Understanding the barriers to training and workforce participation and retention, focusing on structural supports that may be required, such as childcare and timing of training (e.g., weekends or evenings).
3. Understanding and recommending actions to address issues around workforce retention and engaging with people who have left the sector and employers.
4. Delivering accessible training options for up to four industry areas to address barriers to participation.

Overview of research activities completed to date

Individual interviews have been conducted with 22 potential students to determine barriers to study (item 1). This information has been de-identified and shared with the project control group, to support design approaches for study models and supports. Interviews will continue as the project progresses until target numbers of students are reached (45).

As a result of strong initial interest by local people in completing ECEC training, a pilot program has been developed for ECEC, commencing in July 2024. This constitutes the first pilot program (item 4). The delivery approach will be a hybrid model, supporting physical group training at the Wimmera campus in Horsham (central location) and online training to cater for various needs and accessibility challenges of students.

The research team has also engaged with a cohort of industry professionals who have left the ECEC sector in the Warracknabeal area, and a pilot program to support students with expired ECEC qualifications to receive recognition of prior learning (RPL) where appropriate and engage with updated training modules and placement requirements commenced in February 2024 (Item 3).

The research team, in conjunction with the project control group, have also worked to design a study approach for ECEC delivery that, where possible, addresses barriers to study for prospective students in the initial pilot group. This has included strategies to address technological access, travel barriers, and, challengingly, childcare access, which is needed to support the study aspirations of several prospective future childcare professionals for the region.

Background

In Australia, Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs are generally economically driven in that they rely on a critical mass of student numbers and deliver training in a way that prioritises the training provider's availability and convenience (Griffin and Andrahannadi, 2023). In a rural setting, where economies of scale are more difficult to achieve, this can mean that training is often not delivered, severely limiting the ability of rural and remote areas to address skill gaps and build a culture of education and skills development through innovation and action learning.

The literature indicates that some regions in Australia have better training outcomes than others, with rural and remote areas generally having the lowest completion rates (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2023, p.50). For those regions where the uptake and completion rates of VET courses is relatively high, student mass has not been the driving force behind how and in what ways courses have been delivered and accessed (Lamb, Maire, Walstab, Newman, Doecke and Davies, 2018). Instead, it has been a mix of course-based (flexible delivery, partnering with industry, dedicated staff) and learner-based (student mentoring, partnerships with local agencies, targeted, one-on-one support) (Lamb et al, 2018) that has proved successful. Importantly, the highest performing regions provided VET in partnership and within, community (Lamb et al, 2018).

Regarding the social and caring sectors, there is evidence from both Australia and internationally to suggest that attracting people to train and work in early childhood education and care, disability support, community care and aged care requires more than a one size fits all approach. Training organisations and industry must concern themselves with the social, emotional, physical, geographical and economic needs of individual students and workers across the lifetime of their careers. Caring sector recruits and experienced workers alike need to feel valued and see the value in their work, with 'value' here not necessarily equating to renumeration – though financial considerations do play a role (Clarke and Ravenswood, 2019; Costello, Walsh, Cooper and Livingston, 2019; Grant, Jeon and Buettner, 2019; McDonald, Thorpe and Irvine, 2018; Ryan, Bergin and Wells, 2021). Recruiting and retaining care sector employees requires consideration of individual worker needs and applies to individual organisations and across organisations (Devi, Goodman, Dalkin, Bate, Wright, Jones and Spilsbury, 2021; Logan, Cumming, and Wong, 2020).

Attracting and training care workers in rural areas has been identified as particularly challenging. The literature indicates that some regions in Australia have better training outcomes than others, with rural and remote areas generally having the lowest completion rates (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2023). For those regions where the uptake and completion rates of VET courses is relatively high, student mass has not been the driving force behind how and in what ways courses have been delivered and accessed (Lamb, et al, 2018). Instead, it has been a mix of course-based (flexible delivery, partnering with industry, dedicated staff) and learner-based (student mentoring, partnerships with local agencies, targeted, one-on-one support) (Lamb et al, 2018) that has proved successful. Importantly, the highest performing regions provided VET in partnership and within, community (Lamb et al, 2018). A 2023 Jobs and Skills Australia report highlighted that for regional and rural areas, "there may be latent demand for training that is not being met because people lack access to transport or because of the absence of a local provider" (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024 p. 25).

Most Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs are economically driven in that they rely on a critical mass of student numbers and deliver training in a way that prioritises the training provider's availability and convenience (Griffin and Andrahannadi, 2023). In a rural setting, where economies of scale are more difficult to achieve, this can mean that training is often not delivered, severely limiting the ability of rural and remote areas to address skill gaps and build a culture of education and skills development through innovation and action learning.

For western Victoria, there is the added opportunity that almost full employment affords, which is competition between organisations for skilled workers (Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Economic Development Strategy Supporting Analysis, 2022).

VET to address skills shortages in rural Australia

It wasn't until 2007 that comprehensive Federal government level VET policy responses emerged designed to address emerging skills shortages in rural areas. At that time, the topic of skills shortages was as pressing then as it is today. Overseen by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation program undertook research examining how the issue might be addressed by industry. The report focused on specific health skills, including "IVET-trained workers in the health industry, such as enrolled nurses, nursing assistants, personal care assistants, allied health assistants and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers" (Kilpatrick, Lê, Johns, Millar and Routley, 2007, p.7) many of which are relevant to this current project.

The research examined 74 VET models that, at the time, represented innovative solutions designed to address skills shortages in the health sector. In some cases, models actively challenged the status quo. For example, those programs that established training opportunities in new locations (including rural areas) and in new skills, partnered with industry to combine training with job redesign and redevelopment (Kilpatrick et al, 2007).

Then as now, care giving roles within the health and community services sector had shifted from a predominantly professional nursing workforce towards less well paid, lower skilled practitioners. It is argued that this shift, in combination with other factors, has resulted in "persistent job vacancies and overtime in the health sector, as well as poor retention and pay rates. Women make up 78% of the health workforce, and the workforce is ageing" (Kilpatrick et al, p.9).

Not unexpectedly when viewed in hindsight, the authors found that there is no one-size-fits-all approach, with the VET sector urged to create more flexible training options and for industry to redesign occupational models. Better and stronger partnerships between training organisations and industry were also encouraged.

Critically for this current research project, findings from this report suggest that of the 50 most successful training models examined, most are targeted to the location and demographic, involve industry in the design and delivery of the training and include job redesign:

"Job redesign and training models produce effective outcomes for organisations, as they enable organisation-wide responses to skills shortages through redesign of jobs, creation of new roles, and facilitating mobility across health roles, as well as training" (Kilpatrick et al, 2007, p26). Job redesign also included the creation of clear career pathways for workers already working in the sector and the broadening of training to provide opportunities for new trainees to work across multiple health disciplines.

Three years after the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation program report was published, Skills Australia wrote an analytical piece titled *Creating a future direction for Australian vocational education and training: A discussion paper on the future of the VET system* (Skills Australia, 2010). The impetus for this paper was the need of a road map to reach the COAG targets for 2020 to respond to the challenges of staying competitive in an international market with an aging population and lack of workforce skills. Despite recognition that the reforms over the previous decade had "created strong foundations for the VET sector" (Skills Australia, 2010, p.4) there remained concerns that there was as yet no real, clear pathway for how the VET sector would address the increasing need for higher qualifications and workforce skillsets.

One of the key challenges the discussion paper outlines is how the service delivery system can meet the needs of individual workers and their employers. To remain internationally competitive, Skills Australia (2010) recommended that VET:

"Needs to provide flexible support services, and possibly improved financial support, for many individuals who have been previously disengaged, or who experience multiple disadvantage. This may entail case management approaches and strong partnerships between providers, government agencies, community organisations and employers. More flexible use of resources and new models of collaboration, potentially across multiple service providers may be needed to allow this to happen" (p.4).

An Australian study examining the findings of research into the challenges of recruiting and retaining early childhood education and care (ECEC) workers found that passion for working with children might motivate some to embark on an ECEC career, but passion for the job did not necessarily result in retention (Fenech, Wong, Boyd, Gibson, Watt and Richardson, 2022). Instead, the authors found that the factors influencing retention included “self-reflexivity; a drive to overcome challenges; a preparedness to invest unpaid hours while maintaining work-life balance; determination and persistence; a commitment to ongoing professional development; and a capacity and willingness to formally or informally exercise leadership” (p.5). Importantly, all of these attributes rest entirely with the worker – it is the worker taking full responsibility for their career trajectory. That altruism, personal sacrifice and self-motivation – all of which are admirable traits – were the primary motivators represents considerable risk for both the organisation and the worker. If the onus of career satisfaction falls within the purview of the worker, then the organisation has little control over the factors influencing ECEC worker retention. For the worker, if motivation flags, the organisation may not have the capacity or ability to respond to the worker’s individual needs.

Fenech et al (2022) found other individual and personal factors can have a significant influence on ECEC worker retention. These included not being able to live on the wage provided, reconcile the reality of working as an ECEC and their original motivation of wanting to care for children, and for women, a lack of support to return to the sector after maternity leave or juggling family commitments. As well, “a diminishing passion for teaching, and the development of burnout, also contribute to ECTs’ attrition (Fenech et al, 2022, p.5).

VET delivery: Face-to-face, online, hybrid

The popularity of online learning in Australia arguably reached its zenith during the COVID-19 pandemic, though ‘popularity’ here is used advisedly. Prior to the pandemic, education and training providers saw benefits of online learning as a cost effective and convenient means of course delivery. Online delivery was also thought to benefit those for whom face-to-face learning was challenging, such as those working full time, managing caring duties, managing illness and disability or living in rural and remote areas (Ali,2020; Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner and Sindhi, 2018; Stone, 2017). However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, problems with the online learning model were emerging. Critical issues included poor retention and low completion rates (Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner and Sindhi, 2018; Romero and Ventura, 2017; Stone and O'Shea, 2019) which have not improved since the pandemic (Lassoued, Alhendawi and Bashitialshaaer, 2020; Manzoor and Bart, 2021).

In higher education courses delivered as online-only, Australian students report dissatisfaction, isolation, disengagement and a lack of personal support as key reasons for why did not successfully complete their course (Martin, 2020). For those who do complete, the evidence is more complex. A recent study found that levels of satisfaction, engagement and overall enjoyment of online courses was often higher in comparison to their face-to-face and blended delivery classmates, although the difference was modest (Stevens, Bienz, Wali, Condie and Schismenos, 2021). Stevens et al (2021) suggest that online learning, done well, can be more effective than face-to-face delivery when course content is facilitated through positive engagement strategies.

Skilled tutors able to create “well-scaffolded engaging learning activities, particularly those conducted through small-group interactive tasks which develop independent learning skills” (Stevens et al, p. 291) was highlighted as crucial, as was the use of peer-to-peer support:

“Peer facilitation... may be one of the best strategies to encourage participation, while also freeing the teacher’s role to focus on developing consensus or specific learning outcomes. Importantly, such student-to-student interactions appear to generate higher levels of cognitive challenge and activity, with the reviewed evidence indicating these specific relationships were often stronger in online team environments” (p. 291).

These findings are pertinent to the current study, as they suggest that the benefits of face-to-face learning can be replicated in online learning if online courses are well designed, resourced and executed.

VET and issues of access

There are of course added issues facing vocational institutions looking to occupy the online space. By their very nature, vocational courses require a practical component, with students attending in-person placements, workshops, salons, kitchens and the like as part of their training. Students who can only access their training or education online due to living at considerable distance from their institution and/or from towns and cities face both economic and practical disadvantages. Vocational training in aged care, disability support, community services and early childhood education and care can be a challenge to deliver as online only, given that these courses generally require students to participate in practicums across the life of their training. For rural students living in communities too small to host hospitals, childcare centres, disability and aged care supports and so on, can face considerable financial and other pressures when placement requirements are mandated.

Students must often source and pay for accommodation, travel, food and the like to attend practicums. In Australia, practicums are for the most part unpaid, though the current Federal Government recently introduced a weekly $319.50 'Commonwealth Prac Payment' (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, 2024) for student nurses. Students might also need to negotiate with workplaces for time off or miss out on casual shifts and work to attend placements. For those with young children, childcare might also have to be sourced and paid for. As is well documented, large parts of western Victoria are in childcare "deserts" (Hurley, Matthews and Pennicuik, 2022). Another challenge that is particularly relevant for the western Victoria community is that the core demographic being targeted for this research project (young women in the 18 – 44 age group living in the region) are often running farms and households with their families (Tischler, McDonald and Reeves, 2022). For these women, taking time away from the farm and children is a further financial and practical imposition.

The Infrastructure Deserts

A barrier specific to western Victoria is the various 'infrastructure deserts' impacting the region, including access to digital infrastructure, childcare and public transport.

Digital

In 2022, Tischler, McDonald and Reeves undertook a study examining issues contributing to low rates of digital inclusion and engagement within the Wimmera Southern Mallee region. This research found that despite considerable investment in digital infrastructure, digital inclusion has declined. Issues around access to the internet were identified as problematic, but notably so too were digital skills, or the ability to use the technology. For this current project, a lack of digital access and skills will need to be considered when designing training supports for western Victorian students to provide the level of individualised support they need to undertake and complete their training.

Childcare

Lack of childcare is an ongoing issue for the WSM. A report by Tischler, McDonald and Reeves (2020) found that a combination of market failure, challenges in training and retaining childcare staff, prioritising of kindergarten services and a lack of centralised responsibility for childcare service delivery are contributing to the current crisis in childcare for this community. Importantly, the report also found that the expectation that women are primary carers of their own children remains a dominant cultural norm and limits young mothers' ability to undertake study, full time employment or to further their careers.

Transport

While western Victoria is generally well serviced by both road and rail, these networks prioritise trade, rather than work or study commutes. There is also limited public transport outside the larger urban centre of Horsham. VLine provides regular bus passenger services connecting the larger towns across western Victoria with regional urban centres, such as Bendigo, Warrnambool, Ballarat and Geelong as well as Adelaide and Melbourne (VLine, 2024). There is also the tri-weekly Adelaide to Melbourne via Geelong Overland train service (Journey Beyond Rail, 2024).

Commuting between farming communities and smaller townships is also challenging because of the distance and the time it takes to travel large distances (Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Economic Development Strategy Supporting Analysis, 2022). For example, Hopetoun, with a population of 694 and some 195 families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021) is some 120 kilometres (approximately 80 minutes) one way from the major centre of Horsham. Hopetoun, as indicated above, has some ## children on a waiting list for childcare. Attracting local people to train to become childcare, aged care and community service workers is challenging when the only local training opportunities requires a two and a half hour round trip by road. With petrol and gas prices in rural and regional Victoria consistently higher than in other Victorian regional centres and Melbourne, cost of travel can also factor into decisions rural people make about taking up local in-person training, education or employment.

Research Questions

Questions asked explored the following themes:

Barriers to study

Support needs

Structural needs for training (e.g., timing, location)

Progression through training – challenges & opportunities

Perceived impact of structural and personal supports

Readiness for the future

Methodology

This project utilises a mixed methods approach, commencing with a literature review examining barriers and opportunities for rural and remote areas in attracting and retaining a local skilled workforce in the social support and caring industries. The review also sought to understand those factors that may hinder or encourage successful training engagement and completion.

Key areas of focus were identified from the literature and other quantitative data sources regarding trends in VET training attraction, engagement, retention and completion in rural areas. Based on this information, the research team adopted a method of critical ethnography to collect qualitative data in order to establish the reasons for low engagement with training in the social support and care sector in the region of western Victoria. Critical ethnography is an approach which is used to understand the “complex of social customs, values and expectations that affect our ways of working” (Frow & Morris, 2003, p. 489).

Participants were recruited through professional organisation and community contacts. This included through public communications such as community newsletters, Facebook and library information bulletins. The project was also highlighted publicly through local media networks and a brochure with QR code for contacting the researchers.

The project aims to engage with up to 45 participants, all of whom were over 18 years of age. The sample size is a statistically significant sample for the purposes of qualitative research and allows for a focus on depth of experience of participants to ensure we understand the deeper physical, cultural, historic and structural barriers that may impede people from accessing and engaging in training in aged care, disability support, community services and early childhood education and care.

As this project has two phases, participants were provided with a PLIS prior or at their first interview that explains the project and its intended outcomes, with a focus on improving information and support for people to access and engage in training programs. If interviewees go on to continue participating in the research as trainees, they will be provided with a second PLIS which reinforces the follow-up nature of this research and how information will be managed as it will be collected from small groups. This is because it is envisioned that there will be constraints on the levels of anonymity the researchers are able to ensure due to other agencies being involved in the research as training proceeds.

This work involves individual interviews with up to 45 adults of workforce age (18 to 70 years) to gather critical information from rural western Victorian residents not currently engaged in either training or in skilled work within the targeted industries. Workforce data suggests that women in the 25- 45 year age group are

underrepresented in the workforce. While the research is not specifically targeting this age group, we are particularly interested in what the evidence suggests are key barriers for women in this age group.

Interview participants were invited to take part in Microsoft Teams interviews and/or telephone interviews. The interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams meeting recordings and transcripts and digital recorder for phone interviews. Individual consent forms were required from each participant. In the case of telephone interviews and some Teams interviews, consent was recorded verbally and stored on file. Interviews were generally no longer than 30 minutes in duration.

All participants were required to be considered 'independent' in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research sections 4.2.8 and 4.2.9. All participants will be of sufficient maturity and independence to make an informed cognitive decision regarding their ability to provide consent.

The research analysis is undertaken thematically. All participants are de-identified in the research, with specific identifying features (such as names and workplaces) de-identified to protect the identity of each participant as much as possible.

Results

The first stage of engagement with prospective students engaged directly with a range of people from across the study area, with an interest in undertaking further study.

Summary of interview data

Total number of interviews conducted as of July 2 2024 = 22

Total number enrolled in study = 12; Total number enrolled in ECEC RPL pilot = 3

Total declined to participate in research study = 1

Total did not engage with the research study (but still enrolled in course(s) = 2

Total withdrew from course(s) before commencement = 4

Total by support needs (currently enrolled students):

Childcare = 3 students (total of seven children)

Laptops = 5 students

Transport/distance = 6 students

Tutoring = 4 students

Inflexible/limited flexibility work commitments = 3

Students with multiple support needs = 6

Students with no identified support needs = 2

Potential students with VISA issues = 1

Cohort - all identify as female.

Age ranges:

18 – 28 = Eight

28 – 38 = 0

38 – 48 = One

48 – 58 = Two

Location

Edenhope

Goroke

Jung

Horsham

Netherby

Nhill

Warracknabeal

Support Needs

Childcare

Three students have a total of six children requiring childcare to attend in-person classes.

WTIFECEC1 – seven month old and two year old

WTIFECEC2 – four year old child and five year old (at school)

WTIFECEC3 – 12 month old twins and four year old (at school)

Of these, all three students would find it challenging to attend in person if caring for their child/children. All indicated that they would be able to catch up on classes via Teams recordings.

Discussion

Multiple options were investigated as options to provide childcare support to students. In the first six months of the project this has included:

1. Consideration of daycare support on campus, with a qualified ECEC educator. This was rejected due to insurance issues and inadequate facilities on site to support children.

2. Renting a room at existing childcare location for children. This was rejected due to wide age ranges of children requiring support (which differed from existing childcare models at these facilities) and the difficulty of accessing additional educators. Concerns were also raised around preferential arrangements for students in this model, and precedent setting around establishment of private arrangements in long daycare facilities.

3. Accessing a non-childcare facility with good facilities for children and study area for parents (eg. Neighbourhood House) where a ECEC educator could engage in a baby-sitting arrangement (parents have eyes and ears on children). This was considered in some detail, but ultimately ruled out due to timeframe for commencement of training and concerns around insurance.

4. Accessing a facility in township where multiple parents were located to provide a localised ‘satellite’ study arrangement. This was rejected for the same reason as option 3.

5. Vouchers to support private childcare arrangements for parents (eg. Support for grandparents or family member to care for children). This was offered to all parents, but no parents were able to find this option workable.

6. Extension of occasional care facilities in Horsham to provide access for students during study days (Monday & Friday). This option is still under consideration but is unlikely to be a workable option at commencement of study (July 15, 2024). The main challenges with this option are in accessing additional qualified childcare educators to support additional need and limitations on insurance arrangements for facility (ie. Providing additional hours of support). This option is still under consideration.

As there is currently no workable option to provide childcare support for students, students were advised prior to the orientation day that they are welcome to bring their children to this class if they are not able to secure private care arrangements.

Going forward, course delivery will focus on maximum flexibility for parents, including online study as an option, with flexible access to course material. Placements will also need to be very flexible, and this will be an ongoing consideration. Additional teaching supports are also being considered to assist with engagement of students who have had to take up the online study option. This is an important consideration for student retention when studying individually.

Digital connectivity, IT support

Five students require laptops. All students report that they have internet access.

Laptops were sourced for students requiring this support in the initial ECEC pilot program utilising existing internal resources. The Wimmera campus library provides laptop access for students and additional laptops were sourced in preparation for this course delivery. An agreement was reached to allow students to have long-term loan access to laptops, rather than the usual seven day access.

Other options were considered, including purchase of laptops for students through the program budget, however using library laptops was considered a more cost effective and better supported option. An important consideration was that students can access ongoing IT support through the University with university owned laptops.

Given the earlier research suggesting that digital connectivity (internet and mobile phones) can be 'patchy' in the WSM, the researchers were pleased to note that all students interviewed reported having access to the internet and ability to use online systems such as Microsoft Teams and other online software to stream online classes, access course material etc. Students advised that they needed laptops because they normally accessed the internet through iPads (or similar devices) and/or mobile devices – not because they did not have internet access.

Travel support

Six students have transport limitations for attending in-person class attendance. Location of students:

Edenhope (two students)

Goroke

Netherby

Nhill

Warracknabeal.

Five students do not need travel support as they live locally and have their own vehicles:

Horsham (four students)

Jung.

One student reported that she only had access to a vehicle when her partner was not using it to commute to work. This limited this student's ability to attend classes in person.

Lack of public transport for some students means reliance on private car transport. The use of petrol vouchers was identified as the most practical and easy to administer transport assistance. Offering of a hybrid study model which allows students to study from home also helps with managing travel.

Inflexible/limited flexibility work commitments

Three students identified that they currently have limited or inflexible employment conditions.

WTIFECEC8: Has recently secured employment as a kindergarten assistant and the kindergarten days are Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. This roster would prohibit the student attending (either in person or via connected classroom) set class days on Mondays for the Certificate 111 ECEC.

WTIFECEC10: Works part time but roster changes weekly, so challenging to commit to in person or online classes.

WTIFECEC12: Works Mondays but may have some flexibility to attend some classes in person and/or online.

All three students indicated that they are able to catch up on classes via Teams recordings of the classes.

The research team negotiated with Horsham TAFE around flexible delivery options for this course. Through these discussions, it emerged that only a small number of classes would be delivered in person by a teacher, such as the Orientation Day, First Aid training and one or two others. All the other classes would be delivered online by the teacher from Ballarat. It was therefore decided that Horsham students would only be required to attend the teacher in person classes, with the option to attend all the other classes online.

Tutoring support

Four students have indicated that they will need tutoring/learning support.

For those students who advised at interview that they would like support with assignment writing and general learning skills advice, the research team arranged for the Horsham campus TAFE study support adviser to make herself available for appointments in person or over the phone/Teams with students. This support is in addition to the learning support already provided to all FedUni students, which includes one-on-one sessions with learning skills advisors and classes delivered at the campus by Library Services.

Students with no identified support needs

Two students reported that they could not identify any support needs at time of interview and could attend in-person classes and would be able to attend placement requirements. These students:

- Lived in Horsham
- Had their own transportation, IT hardware, software and internet connectivity
- Had previous education completion levels of Year 10 and Year 12 respectively
- Had family/friends able to help them with learning support
- Did not have caring responsibilities
- Worked casual and/or part time with flexible employment conditions

Students with more than one/multiple support needs

Five students had more than one and/or multiple support needs

WTIFECEC1 Childcare Laptop Travel

WTIFECEC3: Childcare Laptop Travel

WTIFECEC5: Travel Tutoring

WTIFECEC10: Laptop Tutoring

WTIFECEC12 Laptop Travel

Flexible course delivery (hybrid/online via connected classroom)

With only two students out of the 12 enrolled advising that they do not need any extra supports, the research team recommended that the course be run to maximise flexibility. Classes will be held from 9.30am to 4.30pm on Mondays and Fridays. Students are encouraged to attend Monday classes but can also choose to attend online. All Friday classes are proposed to be online only. All students will be advised in advance of the days in the course calendar that require in-person attendance (First Aid training being one example).

Delivering responsive study through a ‘test and try’ approach for student supports

A key focus of this project is to engage with strategies to reduce barriers to study. In the early stages of the project, people were invited to engage with the research and TAFE teams across all four programs: individual support, disability support, community services and early childhood education and care. Initial engagement determined that the strongest level of interest was in ECEC study. Most students (78%) were interested in engaging with this study program.

As a result, the project control team determined that the Certificate 111 – ECEC would be the first pilot study program to be delivered. The program utilises the initial information from the research about challenges to study and seeks to address these via a range of strategies including financial support for travel, addressing study costs (materials & uniform), technology access, flexibility of course delivery (online & in-person), placement support and childcare support.

The level of interest in ECEC training is, we think, due to a range of factors, including profile of the problem within individual communities and the level of interest in supporting change. Notably, the areas where the most prospective student interest has been found has been in areas where childcare has been particularly highlighted as a challenge for parents in the WSM, and this appears to have motivated women to engage with the sector. But this is speculative at this point and will require further research. Individual student motivations were not a specific focus of the initial research piece, however the primary motivation mentioned by participants was as a career change after having worked in other industries. For example, nursing, administration, aged care and hospitality. Having young children themselves was also a motivator for three of the participants.

As this first pilot training program progresses, engagement will continue with the students to determine whether interventions are appropriate.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) & fast-tracking workforce re-entry

The project control group has also initiated supports for a small cohort (3) of students in the Warracknabeal area who had previously trained to ECEC Certificate III level. After taking time off to raise children, each of these women were keen to return to work, but their qualifications were no longer valid. All of these potential students also expressed a need in engaging in further training to become Diploma qualified, which is an area of extreme skill shortage (although outside the direct scope of this project).

Given the critical need for additional trained ECEC educators, a trial RPL program was fast tracked for these students – to ensure they can return to the workforce as soon as possible. This involved engagement of a qualified educator to map training needs and assess additional units of study. The students were able to agree collaboratively with the trainer about an agreed time for study, and the training program has been delivered on a Monday evening for 3 hours.

Delivery of this training has needed to be flexible, as all the students have young children, and placements have needed to be managed in non-traditional ways, such as engaging with a workplace for one day a week, rather than a block placement requirement. The program has progressed well, with two students on track to complete by the end of the year, and a third one early in the new year – as additional flexibility around timing of placements has been necessary.

There have been some additional challenges with access to placements for these students, and this is an issue that the research team has identified will require further consideration (please see “Placements” section).

This pilot has been a positive example of how flexible study arrangements for the WSM can be delivered. Notably a key challenge has been to reconcile differing priorities between training providers and students. Students with significant skills in an industry highly value being able to access RPL to reduce time to achieve an updated qualification. It is estimated that students in this pilot have saved between one quarter and one half of their study time because of access RPL. However, this process has been more labour intensive for the trainer in this situation, as each student’s qualifications must be reviewed and mapped to the new system, and from a trainer perspective it is simpler to retrain students according to the new training requirements. As a result, we have a disincentive for trainers and training providers to engage with RPL, as the input cost appears to be higher and the training returns are lower. However, for students and industry, the time benefits are worthwhile.

Next Steps

The research team will continue to engage with prospective students from across the study area and will continue to provide an evidence-based approach for interventions and flexible study in a rural setting. Additional engagement with employers and industry will be a developing focus as the project moves to focus on strategies to improve pathways for students to employment and increase retention in priority industries. The research team will also re-engage with the students enrolled in the ECEC pilot study and RPL training to review the performance of support mechanisms and see if there are any further recommendations or support needs to improve options for future students.

Placements

A need for a much stronger focus on placement support for students in ECEC has been identified by industry providers across the region. This has been reinforced by this project's RPL trial, which has involved significant negotiation with one industry provider around how to resource appropriate supports and flexible placements for these students in a geographically accessible location. Providing positive work experience placements are a critical step in ensuring students move through from study into work and succeed.

Early work by ByFive in the region has engaged with all ECEC providers and there is consensus that additional support is required to ensure professional and engaging placements for students. There is currently a strong sense of overwhelm for existing providers and some structure around how placements are sought from providers and standards of engagement and mentoring with students would also assist. The research team intends to complete further work with employers over Q3 and Q4 in 2024 to test and try options that would provide better support for employers and more consistent and better supported training pathways for students.

Recognition of Prior Learning

The research team is interested to investigate whether there are other geographic clusters of students who could potentially be interested in upgrading expired or incomplete qualifications, particularly for ECEC. As the foundational RPL support needs have been identified and tested, this is an opportunity to fast-track previously qualified students back into their industry. At this stage we have very little information on whether this is a significant opportunity for the study area, but it could hold potential.

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