

<https://youtu.be/UjkkUO1niVgA>

Developing the Future Workforce Together - Challenges and Opportunities

VET Coordinator perspectives on careers of Year 10 students, Australia

Developing the future workforce together. Interesting theme. A simple and clear statement - a challenge? Before I explore this with you in more detail, let me take a moment to give you a bit of context.

As the CEO of Kwinana Industries Council (or KIC) I lead a very small organisation that is best described as an industry association, like a chamber of commerce.

KIC's members are big industrial chemical and refining companies that operate in a tight geographical area known as the Western Trade Coast, which is located in the Perth metropolitan area, and is referred to as the State's Premier Industrial Area. It pumps about 16bn into the State economy annually and employs about 30,000 workers directly and indirectly.

We receive no government funding assistance for our school-based programs, and this is no accident. More on that later.

Aside from our main focus in member advocacy, we operate a series of programs in partnership with all 17 of the high schools in our region where we take about 200 students a year off site into our courses. This partnership is called our Education Development Program.

These programs are designed for Vocational Education and Training (or VET) students and they are selected for our programs on the recommendation of the school VET coordinators. The target students are from the mid-range of their classes.

We take them through a series of workshops and site visits to expose them directly to careers in industry, and show them what will be expected of them in those careers. In my humble view the programs do a pretty good job and are highly acclaimed by those who know about them. And I'll bet everyone in this room shares this same view about their programs. Am I right? Course I am!

We do actually know what the VET coordinators from our partnership schools think about the value and effectiveness of the programs - how? We asked them through a formal research study.

The research objective was to provide an evidence-based assessment of the effects that the KIC programs are having on the students who take part, as seen through the observations of the teaching and careers advisory staff at the various schools and colleges in the KIC education partnership.

The research was carried out as a series of semi-structured face to face interviews with 15 personnel (a mix of principals, VET coordinators or Year-10 coordinators) across a sample of 12 of the 17 schools within the KIC partnership. Data was gathered through the interviews which were organised and conducted by a professional market research company.

So now I'm going to go through the main findings contained in the executive summary of the research report, and then proceed to link these into the theme for this session.

This is what the VET coordinators told us...

- The KIC Year-10 programs were almost universally lauded as an extremely valuable tool for helping Year 10 who lack a bit of direction to find a focus for their post school careers
- The immediate effects on students are found in increased motivation, focus and self-confidence, often with a clear sense of the direction they want to take upon completing their schooling, whether that involves an apprenticeship and trade, or a university-based training program
- Many commentators noted that the program has particular benefits for girls who typically have a quite narrow range of career options in mind. Many also noted that their students from diverse backgrounds felt welcomed and included
- It seems that it would be difficult to overstate the benefits that exposure to adults in the "real world" as represented by the industrial mix within the KIC provides to many of the kids involved in the program
- The format of taking a couple of students from each school is regarded as a strong positive element as it enables students to meet and team up with Year-10 students from other schools, free of the social dynamics of their own school.
- The provision of the project shirt was seen as an important part of the process of "all being equal" outside the school environment
- Universally the respondents indicated they would advocate for the programs to be introduced into other industrial areas
- They reported that the improved focus, maturity and enthusiasm for their schooling was all related to the connections that the program makes between what they learn in school and the pathways to careers post school.
- Respondents strongly applauded the KIC for creating the program and greatly appreciated the time that the industry representatives allocated to exposing the next generation to the career options right on their doorstep. They said the program merits wider recognition.
- I could continue on, but you get the drift.....

So, now that you have the context of our research, let's work this in to the subject matter of this session.

The key parts of the title for this session are "future workforce" - and "together"

Well where I come from in Australia, two thirds of the workforce fits into the baby boomer age group, the post war babies born up until about 1960 are retiring in their droves. Do they need to be replaced by a future workforce? Yes ... probably only in part though.

We know the future workforce is going to look different to the current one. Of course we do. Some of the new jobs will look like the old ones, but increasingly they won't. But for today's young people, there are new jobs available for them in this industry sector, and we have a reasonable knowledge of what those jobs will look like - industry tells us.

So what skills do these young people need? I think that identifying those skills and teaching them is the obvious and easy thing to do.

The challenges are found in how we connect the students with possible careers in ways that they feel motivated to take action themselves.

This of course is “Aspiration - to have aspiration is to have ambition, or a strong desire....for something”.

We know, because the research has told us, that the programs can sow the seeds of aspiration in our youth, and can then facilitate the germination of those seeds. You will agree that we, collectively, through our courses have given them something much larger than a set of skills. If our youth can come out of our programs with an identified and awakened sense of ambition, in my book, we have succeeded.

The skills they get are the tools they use to achieve that ambition.

Its gratifying to know that the VET coordinators observe that aspirational motivation in their students.

What better way is there to facilitate the emergence of aspiration than to put our youth directly in touch with various organisations in commerce, industry, public and the not-for-profit sectors? For them to get into these sites, and have the opportunity to converse with those already working there - well I think everyone in this room would agree that there is nothing better to kindle ambition than to experience what it would be like to work in that field - to directly experience it.

And we can supercharge the fulfilment of that aspiration by opening up the industry side (the future employer side of the equation) by exposing them to student-hosting opportunities. In my experience, they love doing it.

Now, we all know our own programs are good, better than good...of course we do - and we're constantly told they are.

But, and it's a big but. Are the programs perceived as being good by others external to them? - maybe for example the funders, or potential funders of the programs? Does it matter if they do or don't know? Most certainly it does. If they don't know, well then our programs are vulnerable.

For me, this is where the “together” in the theme for this session comes in. The together, for me, is the young folk, their parents, schools and teachers, tertiary institutions, employing organisations, governments and program SPONSORS (more on that soon). It's a right old mix, and not an un-problematic one might I add. Nobody said it would be easy ay?

So, let's get to our programs shall we?

How do we know if they're good, great, or indeed if they're actually achieving what they set out to achieve? Well the participants tell me they are. Their parents tell me they are, and the teachers do too. The companies that host student visits greatly appreciate being involved. We can get good write-ups in local community newspapers (if we write the copy for them). Sponsors are attracted to put money into them, so they must see the value - right?

Maybe the program wins an award or two - which is welcome recognition. But how do our programs compare to others that do similar things?

And does it matter anyway?

Well, yes, I think it does. Our programs need to be seen as leaders in the field, and clearly they are.

In the medium to long term, programs like the ones we all run, do best when they are not tied to government contracts -. If your public servants are similar to the ones we have in Australia, their thinking tends to align with political cycles. They tend to attach themselves to programs that are already demonstrating success, by 'helping out' with some financial support. This gives them instant low-risk success and they are able to claim the political accolades for that success. Yes, I admit it, I have a tiny bit of cynicism around this, but all funding assistance is welcomed, right? At whatever cost? Well, not so sure about that one.

So, let's say our program gets government funding assistance. we're happy right? But you know what, that program is then dependent on that income source. Then, at some point in time, they may de-fund it, because of "other priorities". How many times have we seen great programs fail because funding has been cut? We get weaned on to the funding stream, and then later have to get weaned off - quick smart! In many cases, sadly, the program dies with the funding.

Maybe what we need in order to counter this ultimately destructive practice is non-government third party recognition? - objective, reasoned, provable? This is where the research comes into its own.

Research that proves our actual programs deliver positive outcomes.

Two years ago when I attended this conference for the first time, the totally obvious revelation for me was that everyone I listened to or spoke with about their programs was in it for the kids. The payoff for us is to witness the wonderful bursting forth of aspiration that we see coming from the participants in our programs, when for the first time, they see a possible future for themselves.

When we observe those moments, it is sheer gold isn't it? Marvellous. Isn't this the reason we design and deliver our programs?

Isn't that why it hurts us so much when the government funding contract gets withdrawn?

I say yes it is, and I also say, we need to be looking at alternative funding sources for the longer term sustainment of our programs. This is putting more parties into the "together" mix.

So, could we forgo government funding in favour of offers by the private sector for funding? Too right!

If the objective is to get weaned off the funding assistance provided by governments before it's taken away, and to move towards a self-funding model, attracting third party sponsors - then this might just be the best way to do it.

So, let's step into the sponsors' shoes for a minute - after all, sponsors can be part of the definition of "together" can't they?

What will they look for? I think the answer to this can be categorised in two ways.

The first is that their association with an excellent program is quite simply, good PR. It's good business sense and builds good community reputation.

The second thing they could be looking for is an association with the program because it is intrinsically the right thing to do, because it genuinely aligns with the company's values.

It doesn't really matter what their motivation is, so long as they partner with us in a longer-term funding agreement - right?

They want programs that deliver local community-based success stories that their good names can be associated with. It's better for them if the programs are low risk ones, that already get good publicity and that deliver lots of photos that are usable in corporate publications, like annual reports and community newsletters.

But will those companies consider investing their sponsor dollars with us just because we say our programs are good?

Well they should, shouldn't they? We are very passionate people, decent, honest and believable too.

And you know, they can't take risks with their corporate reputations, or their brand, so what can convince them that our beloved programs do great things? Easy - properly conducted research can do this.

But research is obscenely expensive, so we can't afford to do it right? Wrong. Ours cost \$8,000, from its conception to report delivery.

We accept no government funding for our programs, because of the strings that come with it, and over time they will want to change it in some way to meet their needs.

We've been quite successful in gaining private sector sponsorship over recent years. It can be done, but it takes an organised approach.

So, to wrap up, here are some of the learnings about getting sponsorship we've discovered along the way:

- Get your IP secured - trade mark the brand so its yours
- Build a following of interested organisations (private and public) and have a tiered sponsorships package approach.
- Target big corporates for the longer-term upper-level partnering relationships offering them lots of opportunities for exposure of their brands
- Make your program replicatable, and be there to offer to help your major partner to roll the program out in other geographical locations where they have a presence.
- Be prepared to tailor your sponsorship packages around the needs of your main partners.
- Get the research done so that they know the programs are demonstrably achieving the results that we said it would.

Well, that's it from me folks. I'm happy to talk more with any of you in the café conversations or at the bar into the dead of the night if you want to. Ask me for my business card and we can chat over the email in the months ahead if you'd like to.

You know, the good thing about this conference is that we all share a common objective, and that means we have a bond that stretches around the world.

Enjoy the rest of the conference.