ASVET Professional Development Workshop Report
November 2020

'Teaching and Learning – During and Beyond COVID'

Introduction.

On Thursday 26th November 2020, The ASRC ASVET team delivered 'Teaching and Learning – During and Beyond COVID', an online Professional Development workshop for VET practitioners and other relevant cross sector stakeholders. The workshop was designed to explore and respond to the experiences and learnings of students and practitioners during the pandemic; when the education system and learners had to quickly pivot and adjust to remote and online learning to comply with the restrictions. Forty-four practitioners attended the workshop, which the eighth workshop was delivered by the ASRC ASVET team since November 2016.

Thanks to its online format, and the removal of distance barriers, a panellist from a regional TAFE and other 5 representatives from regional TAFEs and private Registered Training or Community Service Organisations were able to join the workshop.

We hosted two panel discussions, one with practitioners and another one with online learners with lived experience of seeking asylum giving added depth and perspective to the discussion. We also invited two keynote speakers to provide their reflections and insights into the ASVET program and the impact of the pandemic. At the end of the event, we allocated a time for breakout session where all participants could have the opportunity to share their experiences, and strategies and network with each other (refer to Appendix 2: Workshop agenda). Before the workshop, we provided participants with video presentation, summarising our ASVET administration processes amid the pandemic. Participants were invited to ask their questions related to the video presentation during the event or after, via our education email.

This report includes:

- Name and organization of participants   Appendix 1
- Workshop agenda   Appendix 2
- Summary of the breakout sessions   Appendix 3
- Post Workshop Feedback Survey   Appendix 4

Summary of Workshop Content

1. Welcome and acknowledgment of country

The ASRC Dandenong ASVET coordinator, Ruby Foletta, opened the workshop welcoming the participants, and delivering the Acknowledgement of Country.

2. Year in perspective:

Abiola Ajetomobi, Director of ASRC Innovation Hub, welcomed the workshop participants and acknowledged all our stakeholders.

She also thanked our ASVET volunteers for their commitment being supportive and helping us to pivot to the online advisory appointments and referrals model. Abiola informed the audience that the ASVET volunteers had been shortlisted for the ''2020 State award'' by Volunteering Victoria for their innovation.

The results were released on the same day after our event; unfortunately, the ASVET program volunteers did not receive the award. However, being shortlisted was in itself, a significant recognition of the tremendous effort of our volunteers and their enormous contribution to the   success of the ASVET program. Abiola also highlighted the learnings acquired from previous workshops such as trauma-informed practices which have been embedded in our work.

Abiola also gave credit to the dedication and commitment of the students; their willingness to learn new skills. Due to the flexibility of the online learning model people seeking asylum have been able to study from many different locations. AS such, we have been able to refer 169 people to Registered Training Organisations and provided 690 advisory appointments to people seeking asylum in need from 1st July up to Mid-November 2020.

In addition to ASVET applauded the state government's extension of the eligibility criteria in January 2021 to include people seeking asylum to access the Reconnect program

3. Keynote speaker: Evolution of the education program over the last 8 years

Our guest speaker Pauline Brown is one of our long-standing ASVET volunteers who started her volunteering role in 2012 and is still working committedly to support people seeking through the ASVET program.

 Pauline reflected on the evolvement of the ASVET program over the past eight years when the ASVET program was first implemented and structured differently to the current model.

In 2016, the Victorian state government made available 3,000 places over two years, ten-fold of the number of referrals from the previous contract, and allowed students to enrol directly to their chosen courses in TAFEs and learn locals but ASRC remained the sole referral agency for private institutions.

Pauline also reflected on the benefits of the program's development of new resources and tools: a webpage to share resources and a help desk to monitor inquiries from RTOs.

Professional Development workshops were also implemented to upskill education and training practitioners, especially those working in admissions and enrolments, assisting them to adapt to the new model seeking asylum

Lastly, Pauline mentioned 3 case-studies where she described:

- Pathways to previous fields of experience if the course exists in TAFE
- Difficulties encountered trying to secure an apprenticeship when the length of ta visa is not commensurate with the length of the apprenticeship.
- Improved potential to study for a degree in Higher Education after TAFE course completion.

4. Practitioners panel discussion:

The first panel consisted of five people: two representatives of regional and metropolitan TAFEs (Kellie Spark from Gordon TAFE in Geelong and Gabriella Zibel from Victoria Polytechnic in Melbourne), one IT expert from ASRC (Muhamed Bekir), one expert in community development from Monash Health Refugee Health & Wellbeing (Rob Koch) and one representative of the Department of Education and Training (Sam Quinlan).Please find below the summary of the discussions:

I. Benefits of online learning for students and organizations:

- Staff social connectedness to support people seeking asylum
- Leave of absence for enrolled students to get prepared before their courses amid the pandemic
- Partner with community organizations to provide computer, other IT equipment, and food to students in need
- The flexibility of the online learning model leads to good record attendance

- Jobs skills centres at TAFE were able to assist students inquiring about employment opportunities There was an increase of 600% of students joining online workshops and forums to improve ''their employability skills''.
- Use of a range of learning services and other types of learning support from the TAFE and also welfare support and counselling services were enormously used by students from people seeking asylum background as their mental health state has been affected by social isolation
- People seeking asylum have had to learn new IT skills during the pandemic
- New Microsoft or Google online platforms and tools were created during the pandemic to respond to the needs in education, private, and public sectors. Many of these new tools (Moodle and Google classrooms) are free or at little cost, easy to navigate, and bring a sense of connectedness between teachers and students.
- At the government level, a range of new resources and data sources we developed to provide evidence-based information within the DET and other government departments. This also supports a collaborative interdepartmental approach to resolve critical issues among vulnerable cohorts.

II. Challenges and potential risks of remote learning:

The discussion identified students fatigue and lack of social connectedness was exacerbated by social isolation and lack of support particularly for those people with families living overseas. Work-study-life balance was also seen as hard to achieve because of family obligations (home-schooling for schoolchildren and care of children under five and the elderly then a short period of time allocated to study online). This was mostly seen in EAL learners as they need face-to-face interaction to learn a new language. Other discussion points included;
- ❖ Students feeling overwhelmed by the new online enrolment processes although there was often assistance available
- ❖ Staff were disengaged and disconnected at the beginning of the pandemic
- ❖ All the volunteering work was suspended.
- ❖ IT issues and ability to troubleshoot was an issue for students and staff.
- ❖ The need to update online resources released to the public to ensure the provision of current and accurate information.

- ❖ Institutions need to skill up their workforces with appropriate level IT skills to utilise new applications so they can deliver interesting and interactive online classes to engage their students
- ❖ Adequate IT systems are needed to maintain and protect confidentiality and privacy around the data collected from students
- ❖ Government bodies are facing issues of maintaining funding to education and training providers and need to find ways to work together

III. How do we embed good practice for online learning and maintain the integrity of our programs:

- Monash Health is helping young people to get into entry-level health-related jobs and also to search for respective TAFE courses which can lead to jobs in the health sector via one-to-one or group online sessions.
- Keep communications and information shared with students consistent so that they can manage their expectations.
- Maintain devices loaned to students, provide access to Wi-Fi connectivity, and compliance to online testing. One TAFE reported offering follow-ups testing for students to ensure their IT systems are safe and in return students are asked to provide their insights into the IT system
- Ensure that students and practitioners adhere to compliance and follow the processes.
- The enabler to delivering a quality program is the feedback from the students, teachers,
- Build partnerships with different stakeholders who are working in the area of technology and are willing to donate their IT equipment.
- IT experts to share their lessons learned and strengths across the sector and share available materials around technology roadmaps, delivery model, funding requirements, or grant application to different bodies such as public and private institutions to support technology initiatives.
- To be effective and efficient, IT systems need ongoing funding from public or private institutions or the community.
- The government has to maintain its investments and reallocate its funding according to the needs during the recovery period. We may need to see an increase in collaborative partnerships between non-profit organizations and state government departments to achieve significant outcomes. A good example of this type of collaborative model is the Working for Victoria Initiative (WFVI).

5. Students' panel

The second panel was made of 3 students with lived experience of seeking asylum who were working at ASRC under the WFVI from June up to December this year. During this time two were concurrently studying online courses. Also, the facilitator was an ASVET alumni, with a teaching background, and thanks to her overseas experience and the local TAFE course, she has successfully secured jobs in primary and secondary schools. Please find below the summary of the discussions:

I. Benefits of online learning:

- ❖ Flexibility and developing good time management to manage work, study, and family commitments and have a balanced life.
- ❖ Full- time online learning can be simultaneously undertaken while working full time to support families. This was not possible before the pandemic as students had to attend in-person classes but now they can arrange their time to be able to work and study.
- ❖ Low expenses because students do not have to commute
- ❖ Online learners have quickly improved their digital literacy as it is the only way to interact with the teachers and ask questions
- ❖ Institutions worked hard and quickly to adjust their learning model to the situation incurred by the pandemic

II. Challenges:

- Lack of motivation and fatigue
- Easily distracted by other family or household members
- Facing technical issues with no one to provide adequate support
- EAL learners are facing more issues coping with the new online environment
- Virtual learning brings isolation and often loneliness because of less interaction with peers and also the teachers
- Some platforms are not secure and teachers cannot unmute the students. It can be challenging for other students if the teacher cannot unmute the ones living in a crowded house.
- Significant impact on the local economy. For instance, students will not commute and will not purchase their lunch in the nearest café or restaurants while at TAFE or University.
- People seeking asylum not having designated TAFE staff to support them with their various queries

III. How to establish life balance:

- ❖ Family support is needed
- ❖ Students have to gain organization skills, for instance, use a calendar to schedule their daily tasks: classes, work, and family business and prioritize some tasks over others. This will help to map each day, week, and month.
- ❖ Multitasking is mentally stressful and students need to take care of themselves and use the weekends for relaxation activities (sports and meditation) and reduce the stress.

IV. How to cope with social isolation

- ❖ Allocate time for conversations with colleagues for instance during lunch breaks and also other friends after work.
- ❖ Social isolation can have a significantly negative impact students who do not have any family members living with them
- ❖ As lockdown has mentally affected our lives, one student suggested laughing sessions with friends and conversation about food to relieve students from anxiety and stress and can provide a lot of joy.
- ❖ The passing away of family members from overseas during this pandemic can affect students' mental health. In many instances, people seeking asylum are not willing to share their feelings with their peers or colleagues and they try to deal with their issues in isolation.

5. Breakout sessions:

The breakout sessions were designed to allow participants to have conversations in small groups and reflect on the two panels' discussions, the benefits, the challenges, and risks of online learning, and also share their strategies on how to support people seeking asylum.

We had four breakout rooms both facilitated by people seeking asylum, working at ASRC under the WFVI. This was a golden opportunity for them to learn new skills. The scribes were our ASVET volunteers who have extensive experience working with people seeking asylum and the ASVET program. (Please refer to Appendix 3 for the breakout sessions summary).

7. Plenary session:

In the plenary session, the scribes in each breakout room had the opportunity to share the main points discussed in their breakout sessions. They each reported that the breakout sessions had provided an opportunity for rich conversations. It was also reported that participants enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on the previous panel discussions, and provided information about strategies already in action in their respective institutions.

8. Close:

The Education program manager, Gillian Meek, thanked all participants who made time to attend the event. She expressed special appreciation to the panellists and other speakers for their inspirational and thoughtful insights. She also reiterated that the ASRC VET program has exceeded its required referrals for this mid-year period, thanks to the work of the practitioners and their respective organizations. She also took the opportunity to thank our ASVET volunteers for their enormous contribution and who are pivotal to the success of the ASRC ASVET program.