Innovation ON TAP

One of the nation’s largest TAFEs has shown it is far from ‘outdated’ by demonstrating a list of successful, ground-breaking courses.
By John Mitchell

Over the past 12 months, the prevailing narrative emanating from some commentators was that TAFE institutes were tired, unresponsive and in need of a massive overhaul.

While there will always be aspects of TAFE institutes, like any large organisations, that could be made more efficient and responsive, this prevailing narrative deserves some scrutiny. For instance, what could be said of this public narrative if evidence emerged of extensive innovation in TAFE institutes?

One reason I find the prevailing narrative unconvincing is that I have just finished drafting a publication on innovations at one of the largest TAFE institutes in Australia, TAFE NSW – South Western Sydney Institute (SWSI), where the hardest part of the project for the institute was to decide which innovations to leave out of the nearly 40,000 word publication.

The committee I worked with found it challenging to select the 15 final examples of innovation for me to research and profile in the publication, because over the past few years the institute has documented and tracked 72 innovations. And as the research project unfolded it became apparent that there were even more.

Not only are there many recent innovations in this institute, the innovations are no accident: they are the product of deliberate planning by the institute to be more customer-focused. As institute director Peter Roberts said in the foreword of the publication, innovation at SWSI “is systematic, in the sense of being deliberate, planned and thorough.”

He continues: “As you read through the exemplars in this publication, you will notice in every case the innovation was not a coincidence: it was pursued and achieved. This systematic approach is a clear demonstration of the institute’s seriousness about being flexible and responsive in serving our students and clients.”

Light bulb moment
In popular folklore, innovation is associated with light bulbs going on. That is, innovation is seen by some people as being about the initial inspiration and excitement, not the perspiration and stamina required to develop a new service, or product or organisational approach. In folklore, innovation occurs occasionally, is flaky and can’t be managed.

In contrast, reputable literature on innovation shows that innovation can be generated on an ongoing basis, often can be handled in an orderly fashion and certainly can be managed, particularly when an innovation reaches the stage of implementation. Think about the large telephone manufacturers, continually producing new versions of their smart phones. Like the phone companies, SWSI is not only committed to ongoing innovation, it is continually innovating, using a systematic approach.

In an interview at the start of the SWSI publication, Terri Connell, associate institute director strategy and development, reinforced the position taken by Roberts, that innovation is a high priority of the institute, and aligned herself with the finding in the literature that innovation can be actively pursued and highly valued, not left to chance.

“In an increasingly competitive environment, it is critical that the institute continues to work on our customer focus and develop creative solutions. That is what we have based our strategic directions on heading towards 2015,” Connell said.

“Our driving principle is that we want to support customers to develop skills, and in developing skills our customers will build community capacity and assist job growth. That’s our key driver.”

The main section of the publication contains six case studies that highlight the impacts of SWSI innovation on industry, clients and individual students. And each of the six case studies contains an interview with a SWSI client that confirms three elements of the SWSI model for innovation: that relationships were built with clients,
that value was created and added, and that the innovation process was systematic.

One, relationships were built: the industry clients and SWSI people worked collaboratively over an extended period of time, and the development of goodwill, openness and trust was pivotal to achieving the aims of the client.

Two, value was created and added: the industry clients worked collaboratively with the SWSI people to ensure the service provided by the institute fully met the client’s need. Three, the process was systematic: the industry clients described how the collaboration with SWSI was focused on the clients’ needs, and that all the steps taken were intended to satisfy these needs.

The first case study profiles the Indigenous Pre-Recruitment Course (IPRC) which provides a pathway for indigenous candidates seeking to enlist in the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The IPRC is designed for indigenous men and women who indicate an interest in joining the Australian Army, Navy or Air Force and are identified in the Defence Force recruiting process as requiring development in one or more areas, in order to become competitive for enlistment.

**Defence Force**

In partnership with the Department of Defence, since 2009 TAFE NSW - South Western Sydney Institute (SWSI) has delivered this course not only in south-western Sydney but also in Tasmania and Western Australia.

This innovation contains the three elements listed above. In terms of relationships built, over the past three years, the partnership between the Department of Defence and SWSI has strengthened, with the institute now offering a national version of the Indigenous Pre-Recruitment Course (IPRC).

In terms of value being created and added, the partners in the project have worked together to provide indigenous young people with a richer learning experience, online learning options, increased mentoring support and access to a Certificate III qualification (formerly a Certificate I). In terms of taking a systematic approach, over a four-year period, the partners in the project have been focused, targeted, thorough and persistent in continually improving the program.

The second case study describes how, in 2010, Genting Hong Kong selected SWSI to assist it in delivering hospitality training at its new academy Genting-Star Tourism Academy (GSTA), in Manila, the Philippines. The relationship has deepened since then, following the successful provision of programs. Working together, the two parties have developed flexible, innovative training programs that meet the expectations of Genting Hong Kong, resulting in hundreds of staff undertaking programs that lead to Australian national qualifications which are also internationally recognised.

The third case study describes how since 2010, SWSI Health and Fitness staff have worked closely with the staff of Carrington Care in south-western Sydney to provide innovative work experience for SWSI students while assisting aged care residents to improve their fitness.

The fourth case study describes how Blue Tongue Recruitment and SWSI formed a partnership in 2011, in which SWSI provides intensive training for existing tradies requiring a second trade qualification to work in the WA mining industry. The partnership has strengthened, with SWSI conducting five programs for Blue Tongue by late 2012.

The fifth case study describes a joint venture between Telstra Operations and SWSI which aims to recognise and refresh the skills of Telstra’s technical workforce around Australia, using the new Integrated Telecommunications Training Package.

The sixth case study describes SWSI developing, delivering and assessing the Diploma of Water Operations for Seawater staff who are at various locations around south-eastern Queensland, using a combination of face-to-face workshops and online learning.

Those commentators who label TAFE tired and unresponsive will be uncomfortable with the observation that the six case studies show SWSI very much extending itself.

**Industry clients**

In each of the published studies, the interview with the industry client was given greatest prominence, and all of the interviewees spoke at length about the relationship formed with SWSI, the value created by the partnership and the systematic way the innovation was developed and implemented.

For instance, Katherine Perkins, organisational development co-ordinator for Carrington Care, summarised the relationship with SWSI. Carrington provides residential care, independent living and community care and has 310 residents in residential care facilities, and about 450 people living independently on site.

"The relationship was formed out of a mutual need. We formed the partnership to benefit both the TAFE students through work experience and our diversional therapy program," said Perkins.

"Every Monday and Wednesday SWSI students come to our four residential facilities and provide one-on-one and group fitness and exercise programs to our residents in both low care and high care."

The collaborative initiative has won two national awards, she said. "We know that it's innovative because no one else in NSW is doing it. It's the first initiative of its kind. We launched it in 2010 as a pilot to see how it would grow; and now it's 2012 and many residents are participating in the program. "It's going from strength to strength and we've won the national Better Practice Award for Innovation for this program. This award is given by the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency, which is the aged care industry's governing body. We also won the Idea of the Year Award for Innovation through the Aged Care Channel," said Perkins.

SWSI’s Peter Roberts said that innovation in the institute was not only undertaken in a systematic way, it also involved continuous improvement. "Once the first version of a new approach or new service is developed, the innovation is improved and the experience generates new ideas. We are continually enhancing innovations, refining them, sharpening them and adding creative new elements leading to further innovation," said Roberts.

This documented evidence of ongoing innovation at SWSI indicates that the public narrative about TAFE being unresponsive to industry needs correction. The narrative may be based on myth, ideology or self-interest, because the evidence suggests the opposite.

The report SWSI innovate will be available soon at www.swsi.tafensw.edu.au.

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Declaration: SWSI is a client of Mitchell's.