

LEARNING IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

An exploratory review of the unique and complex needs of education and professional development in Australian local government, this project aims to inform and facilitate programs to be developed over the life of the Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government (ACELG). ACELG has committed funds through its Workforce Development Program to undertake this review, and the ultimate goal at the completion of this review is to coordinate, commission and/or deliver training programs to address priority needs.

Work and discussions continue to explore gaps in content and availability of education and professional development that specifically relate to local government. ACELG is advocating an integrated national approach to education and training for the local government workforce that:

- is forward looking and reflects the changing environment and role of local government;
- addresses sector needs for essential skills now and into the future;
- focuses equally on people working in the sector and meets their personal needs to enhance their skills and develop their careers; and
- offers seamless pathways between vocational and higher education and ongoing professional development.

By taking a national approach ACELG aims to participate in the Federal agenda and extend the sector beyond local and state boundaries. A collaborative approach to developing future programs will aim to ensure that successful experiences and approaches in each state are shared and supported, that the sector makes better use of limited resources, and that an integrated approach increases the potential for identifying and sharing good practice. ACELG is working with stakeholders that are mutually supportive of creating greater development opportunities and who actively champion a national network of best practice education and professional development.

As an outcome of this project ACELG aims to provide practitioners and providers with a range of support and resources in improving education and professional development. Research and program development will be distributed widely for the use of interested sector organisations. Local government associations, professional associations, Government Skills Australia, VET and tertiary training providers and local government organisations will continue to be engaged in the evolution of the project.

Training Review - Inventory and Gap Analysis

Over the coming months work on the project will aim to identify and connect existing and successful education and professional development initiatives, as well as offering a framework for future collaborative program development

The national review of training will identify current State and Territory training programs focusing on accredited courses and formally presented, non-accredited training programs delivered in-house, regionally and centrally to local governments in Australia. Information about ad hoc training undertaken in-house may be collected and inform the recommendations however will not be the focus of this review.

Information will be collected regarding existing training programs, the range and perceived suitability of course content, methods of delivery, gaps in training delivery, current networking between providers and councils and possibilities for national development of training courses and their application.

Four discrete but interconnected projects which together make up the training review will be as follows:

- Councillor training;
- Workforce development training;
- Training in key skills shortage areas; and
- E-learning.

Councillor Training

For each state and Territory, research and interviews will be undertaken with Local Government Associations, RTOs, educational institutions, professional associations, and government agencies. This will be mainly via the internet, telephone interviews and email.

The following areas will be investigated:

- Mandatory versus non-mandatory training as per legislation
- Pre-election training
- How councillor training needs are identified
- Training provided to neophyte councillors
- Whole of council training opportunities/requirements
- Priorities and gaps across councils

Recommendations will be made regarding existing councillor training programs, the range and perceived suitability of course content, methods of delivery, gaps in training delivery, current networking between providers and councils and possibilities for national development of training courses and their application. Key outputs of this project will be:

- Inventory and gap analysis of councillor training; and
- Collaborative proposals for future programs agreed to by local government associations.

Workforce Planning

Councils face similar workforce development issues in the coming years which require a planned and co-ordinated response:

- Competition for skills – Councils compete with each other and with employers in other sectors for skilled labour. For example in Western Australia the resources boom is predicted to lead to a looming shortages of 150,000 workers in the state by 2017.
- Changing demands for services – Population changes, different expectations of the role of local government and technological innovations mean that councils will have to alter the quantity, type and quality of their services. There will also be changes in the ways people want to access services. All these factors have implications for the type and number of people councils will need to recruit, as well as the skills and capabilities which staff will need to acquire.
- An Ageing Workforce – As Local Government's workforce is substantially made up of workers over 45 years of age, it faces a significant challenge in filling the employment gaps as older employees retire and leave the workforce.
- Skills shortages in key professional areas – Many councils report difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in particular local government workforce areas, including planners, tradespeople, environmental health officers, engineers, building surveyors and building inspectors
- Turnover issues – High staff turnover can harm services and create problems for councils in terms of continuity. But low turnover brings its own problems, including an inability to recruit new staff and refresh skills.

A professional development program will be designed to assist councils in better planning for workforce development. To be made freely available to interested training providers, this course will be designed for a variety of delivery modes as well as potential inclusion in the Advancing Leadership program. The course will then be able to be offered in each state either as part of the program or as a stand-alone course.

Preliminary research will entail contact with existing providers to determine their interest in extending the reach of their programs, or any future support needs - such as course content, register of speakers, or negotiation with providers to increase the availability of existing programs.

Pathways from VET to Higher Education

In the light of the skills shortages which are currently being experienced in local government in many geographic and professional areas, an important strategy is to upskill existing

workers to be able to fill these critical roles. Courses need to be provided which allow para-professionals already working in local government to be able to move into professional roles in key skills shortage areas – planning, engineering, building surveying, environmental health etc.

Tertiary courses which provide these qualifications can also be fairly rigid with regards to recognition of prior learning, and local government para-professionals need good advice as to where and how to gain recognition of any prior training and work experience. Government Skills Australia is also interested in facilitating better pathways for local government para-professionals into the tertiary sector.

This inventory involves collecting information about available VET and Tertiary courses in the key skills shortage areas of environmental health, town planning, civil engineering and building surveying. Contextual information such as skills packages and career pathways in each of these areas will be documented. This information will then inform negotiations with professional associations and training providers to bridge any gaps between available courses, as well as identifying the need for new courses. Key outputs of this project will be:

- An inventory of VET and Tertiary qualifications in environmental health, town planning, civil engineering and building surveying;
- Interviews with professional associations and training providers to verify the contents of the inventory and identify training gaps; and
- Credit transfer and RPL arrangements negotiated between VET and Tertiary providers in areas of identified need.

E-Learning

The use of electronic and social media has many potential benefits for education and professional development in local government. The isolation of professionals within their organisations and across localities can be addressed through a range of web-based online learning materials. Many organisations are beginning to develop on-line libraries, forums, webinars, podcasts and vodcasts etc. However there are also many reasons why access to these media need to be skillfully utilised by providers.

In the first instance this review will explore existing e-learning initiatives in local government, and also some potential new tools and case studies which might inform future program development. This information will be compiled into a web-based platform for training providers for local government. Through this web-based tool training providers currently delivering programs to local government will also be invited to attend and participate in a forum to exchange experiences and build sector knowledge about how to provide this kind of training for local government.

For more information on the Learning in Local Government Project, contact:

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