Project Report

A Skills Victoria initiative

Project title
Building Bridges Indigenous Group. ‘Koori Pilot’- 2006

Victorian Equity Project

Organisation/lead agency
Wodonga TAFE Learner Services.

Project summary

Wodonga TAFE developed and implemented an eight week pre-vocational program for young Indigenous people who were identified by their community as being disengaged from education and facing extreme disadvantage. The program was based on the Building Bridges (BB) model which has proven to be successful with disengaged learners within the Wodonga community.

The learners

This project targeted disengaged young Indigenous people from the Albury - Wodonga area. These young people had been identified by representatives of the Indigenous community, as being at high risk of continued and generational disadvantage through low education attainment, poverty, homelessness, transience, broken family connections, drug and alcohol issues, violence, low self esteem and very low self worth.

The young people were initially untrusting of the Institute representatives, each of them having had negative experiences within education. An informal barbecue held at Mungabareena and facilitated by respected community elders provided a ‘safe’ forum for prospective students to talk with the TAFE, and to develop an understanding of what they would each like to get out of the Building Bridges course. Wodonga TAFE staff spoke with over 20 young people and family and friends about their experience with education and future needs. Concerns about cost, transport, drug and alcohol problems and violence were also raised with TAFE staff.

Twelve participants engaged in the program. These young people ranged in age from 14 years to 20 years. Each participant was engaged in some way with the local Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation (MAC). The MAC had approached the TAFE with concerns about the growing number of young disengaged people within the indigenous community. In partnership with the MAC and in response to their concerns the TAFE Indigenous Building Bridges program was implemented.

After consultation with Aboriginal Liaison Officers, youth workers, Koori staff at TAFE, local indigenous support services, agencies and schools it was reported that some koori youth had been disengaged from the education system from as young as 9 & 12 yrs of age and had remained out of school for several years. A local youth worker from Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation (MAC) reported supporting up to 15 young people who would benefit from further education or returning to school.
The challenge

- This Bridges program had similar aims to our previous BB courses.
- Previously target groups have included, long term unemployed, adult learners, various youth groups, students with a disability, psychiatric disability and mature aged students returning to study. Wodonga TAFE had not previously addressed the specific needs of the local Koori community. In conjunction with Mungabareena it was felt that the successful bridges model could provide a vehicle for young A&TSI students to reengage in education and encourage vocational pathways. Current courses offered to Koori TAFE students had a history of poor attendance with limited positions filled by young people. Community workers and TAFE Dept’s and liaison officers were concerned that young Koori people did not see TAFE as an option and many were indulging in risk behaviors born out of frustration.
- The BB course offered a structured program that was skills based with the built in flexibility to accommodate the needs of individual students but also address the overall group and to some extent community issues. It was expected that in partnership with the MAC Wodonga TAFE could raise and maintain course attendance.
- Background information was shared prior to the commencement of the course.

Wodonga TAFE’s approach

The Young People participated in four accredited modules which included a community focused project. The project chosen by this group was to develop a Koori specific magazine which they titled “Black on Track”.

A number of participants of this program have since graduated to higher level studies within the TAFE and some have returned to school.

A traditional approach to student enrolments with the bridges course is that often enrolments will occur in the family home on the kitchen table. The bulk of enrolments taken for this indigenous / Koori course occurred in the back yard of Mungabareena at an introductory BBQ, with support for students from community workers, family and Koori elders.

The course was started off campus in a familiar environment and students were slowly introduced to TAFE over a period of a few weeks. The course also involved field trips to vocational facilities to pursue student goals and visits to stake holder groups involved or interested in Koori learning opportunities.

Students were assisted with transport needs via a bus pick up system. While this requires more refinement it was a practical solution to a lack of effective transport in our community.

As part of the team-work module students chose a community project that promoted youth issues and Koori concerns. The young students developed a magazine draft called Blacks-on-Track which highlighted their interests and concerns. This was personally promoted by the students to the broader local Koori community, agencies and services. Within the bridges framework students engage in planning that provides personal goals and outcomes along with vocational and educative options.

The results

What was new and special about this group was the high attendance rate compared to recent Koori Student groups and the high re-enrolment rate in TAFE in the Jump Start course, apprentice options and two young members returning to school. The positive results were also acknowledged by parents, support agencies and our TAFE community.

The team work group project ‘Blacks on track’ youth magazine was presented at NAIDOC week celebrations at Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation and was well accepted by Koori elders and support agencies. Koori students responded well to input from Koori elders, cultural comparisons to common conventions and work place expectations and meeting the expectations of an established bridging course. Sharing a mid day meal each day of the course along with group activities based
on the expressed needs of students had a uniting effect on the group and contributed to high attendance rates.

A balance was found between offering cultural support and education in the classroom and BB learning outcomes and within that, dealing with the issues and needs of the young people participating in the course. The usual evolution of the BB process was new to not only students but also our partners. i.e. - visitors to the group, elders, staff from Mungabareena and some TAFE staff needed to ‘take a back seat’ and allow the students to find their pathway through the BB learning outcomes, which the students achieved in brilliant fashion.

Lessons learned

The course was delayed initially to obtain full numbers and this could have been avoided or improved with more efficient transport options investigation and family preparation.

Clearer guidelines are required about cultural input to courses. The functioning components of Bridges directly aimed at student needs were delayed by concerns about providing students with training about their culture. Cultural input is important and supportive however as we learnt components of the course can be incorporated into the Building Bridges structure without being defined as a separate unit within an already successful formula for training. Koori TAFE staff assisted with this.

The Building Bridges Indigenous programme has shown that if courses directly target student needs and personal goals, students can clearly see what they can obtain from a course i.e.; - ‘concrete tangible outcomes’. The student success in education is remarkably increased from the pilot. I would expect we could revisit targeting Koori groups along with our other student groups in Building Bridges courses. However community consultation would require a more personal approach directly involving potential students and family members and or support people and TAFE providers.

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