



THE FUTURE OF CLINICAL CODING

Full course name: Certificate IV in Clinical Classification

Project lead: Victoria University Polytechnic

Partners: Western Health, Global eHealth Collaborative (GeHCo), Department of Health and Human Services

AN ESSENTIAL ROLE – THE CONTEXT

You won't see clinical coders featured in TV medical dramas, but their work is crucial to the efficient running of hospitals.

Coders are responsible for the classification of patients' details, conditions and treatments. This information is used to distribute government funding – if hospitals don't get their coding right, they don't get the resources they need. The information is also used for planning, research and disease tracking.

Clinical coding is complex, specialised work and that means it's a niche that is often hit by shortages – one in three employers report unfilled vacancies. This can affect the general quality of coding work. Health facilities are often forced to hire people who are not job ready, and then invest precious resources on training them in house. Coding practices can be inconsistent within one facility, let alone from hospital to hospital.

AN AWARD-WINNING MODEL – THE SOLUTION

A project led by Victoria University Polytechnic – backed by a \$1.8 million grant from the Regional and Specialist Training Fund – is transforming the way the clinical coder workforce is trained.

VU used the money to apply its blended learning model to deliver the Certificate IV in Clinical Classification. Working entirely online, students practice clinical coding skills on real, de-identified medical records. The project has been so successful that it scooped a prestigious LearnX Platinum Award this year for best online delivery in Australia.



Scott Grentell, manager of clinical coding services at Western Health, says it is the exposure to real-life workplace scenarios that makes the project a game-changer.

"It reduces that burden of training for (health) organisations," he says. "VU's students are basically going to be able to slip into a position and know what to do on their first day."

A PRODUCTION LINE OF QUALITY CODERS – THE OUTCOMES

From October 2017 to the end of 2018, VU Polytechnic enrolled 158 students in six separate intakes.

These places were financially supported by the Regional and Specialist Training Fund grant, and this support has also helped pay for resources to ensure good student retention rates.

Dianne Semmens, pro vice-chancellor, vocational education and pathways at VU Polytechnic, says an evaluation provided fascinating insights into the students' backgrounds.

"Of the students that have undertaken (the) evaluation, a third of them had qualifications already – bachelor or higher level," she says.

"Thirty per cent of them also said they were considering a career change. So people are looking at using their vocational education and training as their springboard."

JOB OPPORTUNITES – WHAT'S NEXT

The project's stakeholders continue to make tweaks based on their continuous improvement philosophy. For example, units will be delivered consecutively rather than concurrently – while using the same blended learning model – as a result of student feedback.

The project has also developed a 'coaching coders' short course, which provides online training to health professionals across Victoria on how to teach coders in the workplace.

While the data on job outcomes for the students who have completed the training is not yet available, Western Health's Scott Grentell says their prospects are excellent.

"The job opportunities in the western suburbs are going to be enormous, and in addition there's a desperate need for clinical coders in regional areas," he says.

He predicts that the work will become even more flexible in the near future.

"As we go to a more electronic-based health system, you might be able to work from the country for a hospital in Melbourne or vice versa, so there's no restrictions on where you have to be to code."

The Regional and Specialist Training Fund is a targeted *Skills First* funding stream that supports training for specific skills in regional and specialist areas that are not being met by the current training market. Training providers who hold a current *Skills First* VET funding contract are eligible to apply for higher subsidies and one-off grant payments for selected courses in specific regions to meet local industry demand or specialised occupations. Funding will be considered where there is a strong connection between industry, training and job outcomes.

To find out more visit:

www.education.vic.gov.au/training/providers/funding/Pages/rst.aspx

or email the RSTF team at:

rstf@edumail.vic.gov.au

"I COULD COMBINE STUDY WITH WHAT I NEEDED TO DO AT HOME"

Student case study: Delphi Anderson



As a mother of three children with additional needs, Delphi Anderson had a lot of contact with medical professionals – and it made her want to become one herself.

"I just thought, 'I really want to get into this field'," she says.

The first step was a Certificate III in Health Administration from Victoria University Polytechnic, a six-month course that gave her a solid foundation in areas such as understanding medical terminology.

That led her to the Certificate IV in Clinical Classification, where she found the blended learning model suited her personality and her busy home life in Wyndham.

"I could study at my own pace, I did a lot of my study work while the kids were at school, or later in the evening," she explains.

"Instead of going to school one day a week, we had webinars you could dial into from home. I could combine that with what I needed to do at home, which is the whole purpose of blended learning, being able to have a good work-life balance while you're studying."

She finished the course in February. Her children are now 21, 18 and 16 and she is waiting to get "all her ducks in a row" in her family life before embarking on her new career.