Opportunities for Australian Vocational Education and Training providers in India

Synopsis
This article discusses the opportunities available for Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers in partnering with their Indian private-sector counterparts. The article provides a brief introduction to VET in India, and offers some practical guidance as to how Australian VET institutions can contribute to the economic upliftment of economically and socially marginalised young people, while also working for their own commercial benefit. The author also outlines the experiences of the Centurion University, an educational group working in Orissa, India.

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For more information on the author, please see her biography at the end of this Monograph Collection.
From the Chairperson

Welcome to the inaugural edition of VETnetwork Australia’s Monograph Collection. VETnetwork Australia is pleased to be adding this to our suite of publications. I congratulate the National Executive on this initiative and Lori Hocking for turning this vision into a reality. Together with the author of our first edition, Kate Waterford, Lori Hocking and Associate Professor Roberta (Bobby) Harreveld, have worked to ensure this is a first class publication.

The notion of “skills without borders” is certainly a topical, world-wide issue and many countries are developing plans and strategies to promote skills. This piece written by Kate Waterford, addresses this issue in this enlightening and thought provoking study about opportunities for Vocational Education and Training (VET) engagement in India.

I hope that you thoroughly enjoy our first edition of an ongoing Monograph Collection.

Terry O’Hanlon-Rose
Chairperson
Introduction

Last year, 2010, was an important year for the Australian and Indian governments in implementing their plan for collaboration on vocational education and training (VET). There are growing opportunities for Australian VET providers to work directly with Indian partners. Importantly, there is potential for them to do so in a way which, while being commercially profitable for the Australian provider, contributes in a meaningful and lasting way to the standard of life of economically and socially marginalised peoples, especially in rural India.

In recent years, several articles have been published on the subject of VET sector partnerships between Australia and other countries, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. Those projects operating through the AusAID program in South-East Asia have had developmental objectives, while most other programs have been primarily commercial (in China and the Middle East). However, only a small handful of partnerships have gone ahead in India. Many people working in the education sector in Australia have until recently thought of India as a source of international students coming to Australia for training and education, rather than as a potential educational partner. Many have also seen India as a delivery location fraught with difficulties and risks. Australian VET providers are only now beginning to wake up to the commercial and developmental possibilities of working with India.

While offering practical guidance for Australian institutions in working with India, this article also explores some of the challenges and difficulties which they will face. This is not done with the intention of discouraging Australian institutions from moving into this new market, but to help them to appreciate the practical and commercial realities; and to guide them towards building strong partnerships based on a mutual understanding of what will work.

Background

The Australian VET sector and Indian students

Australia has developed an international reputation for effective and efficient tertiary education (which, in this paper, is understood to include all forms of higher education, including vocational education and university education). Most of the modern growth in international tertiary education in Australia has come from the VET sector, which more than tripled between 2002 and 2009 (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13). Indian students comprise the second largest group of international students in tertiary education in Australia, after China (Australian Education International, 2009).

However, over the past few years, Australia’s education business from Indian students has suffered, following reports of racist attacks on Indian students in Melbourne and exploitation of Indian students at the hands of private institutions. The causes of those events are not entirely clear, but the Indian media took a highly critical view of the situation and of the adequacy of the Australian government’s strategy in dealing with it. Many Indian students are now unsure as to whether Australia is a safe place to study. The fallout has been a significant drop in Indian student enrolments: the Australian High Commissioner to India was quoted in
India’s Economic Times as saying that Indian student enrolments had declined by up to 50% in 2010 (Economic Times, 2010).

As a result, Australian universities and VET providers are looking at opportunities to regain their Indian student base by offering Australian courses on Indian soil, through partnerships with Indian institutions in development and delivery, and through e-learning arrangements.

**Australian universities and VET providers in India**

Throughout 2010, India’s Education Minister Kapil Sibal aggressively pursued foreign universities and governments to engage with the Indian higher education sector, particularly in skills training (Mishra, 2011). The Minister noted that collaboration from international tertiary education providers could give a boost to India's target of training 500 million candidates by 2020. The Canadian, British and US governments and VET providers are already moving into this potentially lucrative market.

In April 2010, Universities Australia signed an agreement with the Association of Indian Universities (AIU), and announced the commitment of Australian universities to ongoing partnership and collaboration with the universities of India (Andersen, 2009; Universities Australia, 2010).

Some private university-to-university partnerships have also gone ahead. In 2010, the University of Southern Queensland signed an agreement with Centurion University in Orissa, India, under which Indian students can obtain degrees from both institutions by studying in India. Deakin University, one of the earliest Australian universities to establish a presence in India, has now opened the Deakin India Research Initiative (DIRI) (Ravinath, 2009).

Australian State and Territory governments and private VET institutions are beginning to look at similar models for VET, and at opportunities for collaboration on course development, ‘train the trainer’ programs and even procurement of equipment.

Students who are unable to gain an Australian study visa, or who for financial or social reasons prefer to stay in India, may wish to gain Australian degrees and diplomas through such arrangements. Even Indian students who do not need or value an Australia accreditation, might benefit from the expertise and experience of courses developed by Australian VET providers and delivered in India.

Australian VET providers may be able to target these Indian students and recruit them into VET courses delivered in partnership with Indian providers. This would be an important new market for the Australian international education sector. It would also be beneficial for India, where the need for skilled persons far exceeds the existing capacity for training.
Recent developments in India

This article does not attempt to summarise all the efforts currently being made by the national and state governments of India to improve and expand the VET system. This has been the subject of many earlier publications (e.g. Debroy, 2009). There are also several good articles comparing the VET systems in Australia and India, including some available through the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website (e.g. Abrahart, Alvi, Dar, Jena & Tan, 2008; Beddie, 2009; McMillan, 2009).

Skills gap in India

In recent years, the 'skills gap' has been one of the most important topics of debate in the Indian media. It has been said that the gap between growth requirements and current capacity could be as high as 90% (Manwani, 2010). This is a big problem, because the country’s future economic prosperity naturally depends on the productive capacity of its workforce.

A World Economic Forum/Boston Consulting Group article published in March 2010 reported that India will face huge skills gaps in some job categories over the next 20 years; and warned of a looming global labour crisis: 

India has big dreams of becoming a world-class talent hub, a favourite destination for multinationals. By 2020, 100 million economically active individuals will enter the Indian labour force – the equivalent of the combined labour force of the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Spain – which creates a significant opportunity, but also a daunting challenge. Talent availability is the biggest attraction for multinationals deciding in which country to invest. India needs to leverage, create and retain its talent to stay competitive.

Talent shortages in India at a time of high unemployment rates can be summarized in a short phrase: “too few of some, too many of others”. The current surplus of unskilled people and the deficit of skilled people [need] to be balanced out.

(World Economic Forum and Boston Consulting Group, 2009, p. 23)

The Government of India (2006), in its Five Year Plan for 2007-2012, pointed out that only 2% of the existing workforce has skills training; and that only 5% of the population can receive skill training through the formal system. This proportion is one of the lowest in the world (Government of India, 2006, p. 22). The national Government identified that 40 million unskilled and semi-skilled persons in the workforce must be given continuous or further training during the period of this Five Year Plan. Physical targets included expanding skills training programs to cover 20,000 schools, with an intake capacity of 2.5 million people by 2011–12. The Government
also planned to expand access to open and distance learning systems. To implement these plans, it proposed the launch of a Skills Development Mission.

In furtherance of the Skills Development Mission, the Central Government formed the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC), an entity set up under the National Skills Development Council and chaired by the Prime Minister of India. NSDC is a collaborative entity of industry bodies such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI); and government bodies such as the Ministries of Finance (MoF), Labour and Employment (MoLE) and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME); and the Planning Commission.

Since its launch in 2009, the NSDC has published a series of comprehensive reports about “Human Resource and Skill Requirements in India”, analysing the skills gaps in individual industry sectors (see http://www.nsdcindia.org). In brief, it has recognised that India currently faces a huge shortage of skilled workers, which is inhibiting the proper economic progress of the nation. All of the organised and unorganised industry sectors reviewed by NSDC face significant ‘skills gaps’ (where the number of skilled persons required by the industry sector exceeds the number of skilled persons available). The NSDC also reported that this problem needs to be addressed through the free public education system, as well as through private programs, with a focus on secondary and post-secondary training.

There are nineteen sectors identified in the NSDC’s projected human resource requirements between 2008 and 2022. The projected requirements for five of those are noted in Figure 1 below.

The NSDC is already working with Australian VET organisations such as the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). NCVER is investigating the possibility for joint research projects and has already helped to create some links between private institutions in the two countries.

**Figure 1: Projected human resource requirement between 2008 and 2022 (in millions)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2022</th>
<th>Incremental</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction (infrastructure)</td>
<td>25.18</td>
<td>33.87</td>
<td>48.28</td>
<td>58.29</td>
<td>33.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction (real estate)</td>
<td>10.79</td>
<td>14.51</td>
<td>20.69</td>
<td>24.89</td>
<td>14.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics &amp; IT</td>
<td>906</td>
<td>1,446</td>
<td>2,870</td>
<td>4,129</td>
<td>3,223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles and clothing sector</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food processing industry</td>
<td>8.53</td>
<td>10.41</td>
<td>14.27</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2003, Australia and India executed the bilateral “Education Exchange Program on Cooperation in the Fields of Education and Training”. In April 2010, the two governments released a joint ministerial statement announcing a proposed expansion of the Program, to include greater cooperation across all education sectors, including vocational education and training (Australian Government, Australian Education International, 2010).

In the joint ministerial statement, India and Australia announced their plans for future collaboration at three levels: government to government; industry to industry; and institution to institution. The Australian qualifications framework is looked upon very favourably by Indian policy makers. The two governments would collaborate on national qualifications frameworks, training quality standards and credit transfer arrangements. Meanwhile, the industry councils in each country (the National Skills Council in India and Service Skills Australia) would link up and begin to work together on identifying the demand for skills. At an institutional level, there would be cooperation on education, training and research; and exchanges of officials and educators for professional development.

Early 2010 also saw the first high level delegation of Indian government officials and industry representatives focusing on VET to visit Australia. This was followed by the release of the joint ministerial statement; the establishment of the India-Australia Bureau for Vocational Education and Training Collaboration; official visits from NCVER; and a series of visits from and conferences with Australian VET institutions in 2010 and 2011. Discussions between the two governments are ongoing. One idea which will be of particular interest to Australian VET providers is the possibility of creating a jointly hosted website portal to enable Australian and Indian institutions to connect up with one another and exchange expressions of interest.

In the meantime, the state governments of NSW, Victoria and Queensland have entered into partnerships with Indian state governments, and several institution-to-institution partnerships have also been formalised.

In September 2011, it is expected that the Australia-India Institute will host a conference while will include a roundtable on VET issues.

Also important for the VET system in India are the National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF) (similar to the Australian AQTF system, but still under development); the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE, the overarching control body for VET in India); and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA). For an overview of the system including discussion of the role of each body, see McMillan (2009) and Blom and Cheong (2008).
Experiences of the Centurion University (and Gram Tarang), a VET provider in Orissa, India

Introduction to Orissa and overview of programs

At the turn of the century, Orissa was amongst the most indebted of the major states in India. Many of its rural districts still feature on government lists of the poorest and most extremist-affected districts in all of India. For a long time, there was little industry. However, its rapid growth over the past decade has been described by the World Bank as a "remarkable fiscal turnaround" (Ravishankar, 2008). Orissa’s special circumstances, as described in this section, make it an excellent target for Australian universities and VET providers who would like to pursue commercial objectives while also contributing to economic development.

Private and government tertiary colleges and VET institutes are now springing up across Orissa. Most large towns and cities now host training institutes, either government or private. Unfortunately, large pockets of the state have not been penetrated, particularly those in the mountainous tribal areas. These are the areas which, at the primary school level, still suffer from teacher absenteeism and a lack of quality mother-tongue education in locally-spoken tribal languages.

Large numbers of students drop out well before completing the free education system. Across the country, the Government of India provides free education from Classes 1 to 10, at the end of which students sit a major examination, the ‘High School Certificate Examination’. Students who pass that examination may go on to two further years known as ‘Plus Two’ or ‘Higher Secondary Education’, equivalent to the Australian Years 11 and 12. However, the majority of students drop out well before reaching Class 10.
Even those who make it to Class 10 do not excel. Of the 350,000 – 400,000 students who take the High School Certificate Examination in Orissa each year, well over half either fail (132,000-184,000 each year) or perform very poorly, achieving between 35 and 49% and receiving a ‘Third Division Pass’ (78,000-150,000 students each year). Anecdotally, there a strong correlation between the high school dropout rate in these rural areas and local youth participation in extremist political activities. There is active recruitment by Naxalites (the generic name for militant communist groups operating in India, especially in a belt across eastern India known as the ‘red corridor’).

Most of the students who fail or perform poorly at the Class 10 level, like those who have dropped out at earlier stages, do not go on to higher secondary or tertiary education. Instead, they pass directly into unskilled work without further training. These school dropouts perform work with very low levels of productivity, sometimes referred to as disguised unemployment. Where opportunities exist, and there is funding available through some government program or industry sponsor, some join VET programs.

The National Skills Development Corporation selected the Centurion University Group as its first private sector partner in eastern India, in recognition of Centurion’s record for quality education and development work. The Centurion University operates a School of Vocational Education through its social entrepreneurship outreach, Gram Tarang Employability and Training Services (Gram Tarang). Rao, Madan and Reji (2010) provide a detailed explanation of the Gram Tarang model’s skill building and employability training for disadvantaged young people. Gram Tarang signed an agreement with the NSDC in May 2010 to provide training for up to 21,000 unskilled and semi-skilled youth over five years, in different technical trades across Orissa (see NSDC website ‘Success Stories’, 2011).

The Centurion University leads an educational group which includes two business schools,
two engineering colleges, several secondary colleges and even a primary school. It is the first private university in a tribal area of Orissa, and was established by state legislation. Seven VET centres (industrial training institutes or ITIs) are already operational, including two located on the University’s campuses. Where possible, the VET programs draw on the teaching and equipment resources of the two university campuses.

Students who are living below the poverty line (BPL), or who belong to a scheduled caste or tribe (SC/ST), are eligible for sponsorship by the government for their training fees. The Gram Tarang model aims to secure at least one third of revenues through government sponsorships, one third through corporate sponsorships, and the remainder from student payments (see DN Rao et al, 2010). Courses aim to provide these underprivileged youth with dignity at work and socio-economic security.

Gram Tarang has delivered training courses in a range of sectors, including civil construction; training for welders, fitters, machine operators and electricians; IT (including networking and programming); electronics; woodwork; floriculture; fabrication; garment manufacturing; retail sales; automotive; hospitality; etc.

The Centurion University is currently in discussions with the Orissa State Government to develop or support various new programs to benefit rural and tribal communities, including:
- nursing and community health worker training programs;
- community/assistant teacher programs;
- teacher specialisation/refresher programs;
- disaster management courses for community based organisations and government;
- agriculture and allied programs; and
- technical skills programs for high school children.

The last-mentioned program is particularly interesting because, if the program goes ahead, it would be the first time that VET has been offered as part of the standard high school curriculum. The organisation is also looking at Australian models of agricultural high schools, because a large part of Orissa’s economy is from agriculture and forestry.

Discussions with Australian VET providers

The Centurion University has engaged in some preliminary discussions with foreign VET providers for bringing new training programs to Orissa, and developing existing courses. In these discussions, Centurion University has been striving to respect the foreign institutions’ commercial interests and their need to make the programs profitable, while also designing programs which contribute substantially to the economic and social development of the people of Orissa.

Centurion met with representatives of Victorian vocational education and training institutes at the Confederation of Indian
Institutes at the Global Skills Summit held in Mumbai in late November 2010; and has met with representatives of government or private institutions in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory.

In line with the Australian-Indian government’s joint statement in 2010, it is expected that opportunities for institute-to-institute partnerships would exist in:

• joint diplomas;
• course development;
• equipment procurement; and
• train the trainer programs.

Centurion is focusing on expanding into training sectors which are of most benefit to the local people in terms of employment opportunities, including:

• nursing and aged care;
• teaching;
• agriculture, poultry, sericulture, animal husbandry and rain harvesting;
• agro-processing (processing of natural materials);
• disaster management; and
• textiles.

There is also potential for training in areas which have not previously been taught in Orissa, if a demand for skilled workers - actual openings for placement of trainees - can be identified.

Developing feasible price models for course delivery in the Indian market

Australian VET providers working internationally have in the past focused on countries in the South-East Asian region,
where VET may be funded by AusAID or other developmental organisations; or China or the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where programs may be funded by local government or wealthy corporate sponsors. Most private institution-to-institution partnerships (not externally funded) have involved subjects such as Business or Tourism rather than the more traditional hands-on trades, and some have been based on an articulation pathway to further study in Australia.

One of the biggest challenges for Indian and Australian private institutions, in establishing mutually beneficial commercial relationships in the more traditional trades, will be establishing the right price. Indian institutions have much lower costs than Australian institutions, and labour in particular is much cheaper. Student expectations for VET prices are therefore considerably lower in the Indian market.

This is not intended to discourage Australians from pursuing the real opportunities which exist for partnerships with their Indian counterparts. These differences should not be insurmountable, but they are something which Australians must understand and accept in moving into the Indian market.

Courses developed by Australian institutions are much more expensive than locally developed courses. Programs with a high component of Australian labour (such as train the trainer programs) would quickly become very pricey for Indian institutions. If courses are offered at a premium price, the expectation of the Indian trainees would be to earn a higher salary upon completion of the course. In other words, the higher investment must be justified by higher future salary. With little exposure to industry, trainees might not start with a strong appreciation for other potential benefits of investing in the more expensive Australian courses, like the benefits of being trained under international safety standards.

Many Australian institutions assume that Indian trainees will pay extra to secure an internationally recognised qualification. This might be true for a Business student, but the reality is that having a certificate in the name of an Australian institution might not improve the employability or earning capacity of a mechanic, electrician, welder or sewing machine operator. Most VET trainees in these or similar trades would not leave India to work.

Unlike some Indian VET students opting to study in Australia, who might be tempted to make educational choices on the basis of hoping to achieve a particular migration outcome (Senate, Education Employment and Workplace Relations Committee, 2009), Indian VET students in India usually intend to seek out employment in the field in which they have been trained. Accordingly, VET providers need to show - and deliver - concrete post-training income benefits.

Feasible pricing models are likely to be those which allow scaling up by the Indian institution, so that course fees can be kept low and enrolments high. If courses are sold by the Australian institution on a model which facilitates this, then there is scope for the Indian institution to deliver the course to a large quantity of students. Australians could offer a fixed price for a bundle of teaching and learning materials, with an agreed number of hours of supervision or training by the Australian trainers. Or, they could agree to take a fixed percentage of revenue
or profit. Courses which are priced high and on a per-student basis, or involve a significant amount of travel by Australians, or charge for Australian work based on an hourly rate, may not be feasible in the Indian market.

Possibilities for profitable commercial partnerships between Australian and Indian providers include:

- Courses developed in Australia, or jointly, where the content is clearly superior to other locally available courses; and which will result in improved employment/earning outcomes, justifying the higher course fees;
- Courses focused on a new and/or specialised skill or trade, not commonly available at VET institutions in India – but which can lead to employment in India;
- Courses in subject areas able to attract government or industry sponsorship despite the high course fees (for example, courses of interest to government officials); and
- Train-the-trainer type programs which take advantage of modern technology such as video conferencing, to minimise Australian travel and accommodation expenses.

When in the early stages of developing a model for partnership, it would also be worthwhile considering models which involve affordable low fees for basic-level courses, as a way of raising the enrolment numbers in the more expensive advanced courses. Good local VET providers, including Centurion University/Gram Tarang, will maintain an ongoing relationship with their trainees, and will be able to attract many of the trainees back for higher-level courses after they have gained some industry experience.

The Australian recently reported that “Austrade is championing the idea of Australian vocational training courses in Indian workplaces and institutions, and eventually an India-based Australian mining and engineering college” (Hodge, 2011). The colleges might work towards a future capacity of as many as 100,000 Indian workers annually. While New Delhi-based senior trade commissioner Peter Linford suggests this would be a way of regaining the lost Indian market in vocational education (as discussed earlier in this article), it could ultimately contribute to filling Australia’s own growing skill gap in engineering and mining. Dilip Chinoy, CEO of India’s National Skills Development Corporation, was also quoted in the report as saying that he would “happily support and perhaps even help fund Austrade’s proposal for an Australian mining college that provides labour for Indian-based companies”.

What Australian VET providers have to gain in working with local partners like Centurion University

There are many reasons why Australians should prefer to work with local partners in the Indian market.
The Indian partner can draw on their local networks for recruitment of students and staff and for later placements of students; should have a much better understanding of local markets and industries; and can help to smooth over the bureaucratic and administrative processes.

They can also ensure that local accreditation processes are followed, under India’s National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF). Where language is an issue, Indian providers will be able to organise translation of materials, either in writing or in the training classrooms.

Having a local partner is also important because it is not fully clear whether Australian VET providers in India can operate under their own banners in India. In March 2010, The Foreign Educational Institutions (Regulation for Entry and Operations) Bill was introduced in the Indian Parliament. The Government of India has announced that the proposed law seeks to put in place a mechanism to facilitate the entry and regulation of reputed foreign educational institutions, while preventing the entry of those of dubious quality.

Until the intended mechanism is finally determined and established, Australians should focus on strengthening the quality of course offerings from their Indian VET partners. They can collaborate on course development, assist with training trainers and help to procure equipment. However, the courses should ultimately be delivered by the Indian provider, under the Indian provider’s brand. Australians should take care to choose the right local partner and consider the ‘Practical Guidance for Engaging with India’ summary accompanying this article.

Conclusion

There are real and growing opportunities for Australian VET providers to move into the Indian market, in partnership with their Indian private-sector counterparts.

The Indian education sector is undergoing a period of enormous growth. Tertiary education providers in the UK, US and Canada are already looking at this market, and early movers may have a strong advantage.

The challenges of working in India are real, but not insurmountable. Australian VET providers should go into the Indian market with a good understanding of the commercial realities on the ground, and with their eyes open. Most importantly, they should be careful to select the best local partners to work with.

In spite of the lower pricing on VET courses in India, courses developed and delivered in partnership with a well-chosen local partner, taking advantage of the partner’s lower costs, should be profitable. There is great potential for building strong long-term relationships and participating in the long-term economic growth of the Indian education sector.

There is also the possibility of being able to contribute to improving the lives of poorly educated and marginalised young people.
Practical guidance for engaging with India

Most important things to remember when looking for Indian partnerships

What the Australian institution should bring to the relationship
High quality vocational course materials; knowledge of international markets; knowledge of international standards and frameworks; well-qualified and experienced course designers and trainers.

What the Indian institution should bring to the relationship
Knowledge of local markets and industries; networks to recruit students and trainers/teachers locally; resources to translate materials into local languages; physical infrastructure for course delivery; management of relationships with local industry and government; networks for post-training placements; management of bureaucratic and administrative requirements.

Selection of partners
Work with Indian VET providers who have a good reputation for integrity and performance; a strong understanding of local industries and markets; good connections with government and industry; and a commitment to ensuring good post-training labour conditions for trainees. Look for providers with national/state-level government tie-ups.

For example, partners of the National Skills Development Corporation will have already been through stringent selection processes.

Types of partnerships to focus on
Percentage of revenue/profit models; straight sales of course materials; train the trainer programs with a low component of Australian travel - video-conferencing is an excellent tool; courses in subject areas of interest to government departments; courses in specialised or new subject areas; courses in areas of Australian expertise which are likely to improve trainees’ earning capacity significantly; research partnerships; sales of used equipment and equipment procurement services.

Feasible pricing models
Wherever possible, allow for trainee numbers to be scaled up to maximise profitability in the Indian market.

Where to start
Review the website of the National Skills Development Corporation (the public-private partnership set up to facilitate the development and upgrading of the skills of the growing Indian workforce through skill training programs). Read the reports in the “Knowledge Bank” section. The website also lists some of the NSDC’s early private sector partners.
Research opportunities

For Australian researchers, there are two main areas of research opportunities: investigating the challenges and strategies for delivery; and researching areas for potential socio-economic growth and improvement.

Challenges and strategies for delivery

There have been many challenges for Centurion University and Gram Tarang in delivering VET courses to poor rural students in Orissa, some of which are familiar to VET providers in Australia.

School dropouts often genuinely struggle with traditional classroom-based teaching. There is typically too much theoretical and too little hands-on content, delivered in a lecture format, which is difficult for students to process. Trade students require hands-on skills, but also have to become familiar with the theoretical bases for the work. Unless properly supported, students with low literacy or numeracy skills may drop out because they cannot engage with the lectures and written materials.

Course materials are usually in English, but school dropouts are unlikely to have English as a first language, and even those who have studied some English may struggle with technical texts. Materials have to be translated into regional languages and even into dialects and tribal languages. Videos can be helpful as an alternative to written texts, with supporting explanations given by the trainers in the languages understood by the students.

Courses have to be designed to optimise the quality of the students’ learning by engaging with the students’ senses: visual, aural and tactical. Programs must be oriented around the machines and tools used in practice, so that students can participate actively in the learning process.

While the courses are curriculum-based, there should be elements of competency-based assessment, allowing capable students to progress quickly to learning new skills once they have mastered the fundamentals.

Gram Tarang programs also include production processes as an adjunct to course delivery: for example, welding trainees work on parts which are then supplied to industry. This provides ‘real’ skill training and workplace readiness. Trainees also benefit from training in soft skills, both to introduce them to the business world and to enhance their learning. This includes time management skills and communication skills.

In its early VET programs, Gram Tarang allowed some students to live at home and come to campus each day, but this was found to result in high absenteeism. Poor farming families would put pressure on their children to stay at home to help
with work; or there would be transport difficulties between school and campus. Now, all VET courses are fully residential. However, students do struggle with the new experience of living away from their families and communities, establishing new habits and adjusting to a different work culture.

Other practical challenges include:
- attracting appropriately qualified and experienced trainers;
- procuring affordable, good quality course materials in vernacular languages;
- persuading young people of the benefits of vocational education, balanced against giving up work for a period (even if extremely poorly paid).

Another important challenge is post-graduation placements. In India, industrial training institutes, like tertiary colleges and even universities, are expected to ensure jobs for trainees upon completion of the programs. Many VET providers of dubious reputation advertise their courses on the basis of “100%” or “guaranteed” placements, which is generally not realistic or achievable, and results in disillusionment and disappointment with the education system.

Trainees from a state like Orissa, which has lower levels of industry than other parts of the country, must in many cases leave the state to find job opportunities, so placements often involve removal of the student from their community. For students living below the poverty line, taking up skilled employment in a different state may provide valuable economic opportunities for the student and their extended family, but it also carries it with the problems of social adjustment and loss of community culture.

Australian institutions should be aware of and sensitive to these challenges. They should ensure that they work only with local partners who will actively support their trainees and secure fair labour conditions.

Centurion University and Gram Tarang seek to maximise the number of placements within the state; and also support self-employment and entrepreneurship, including through microfinance arrangements aided by a sister concern (Gram Tarang Financial Services). For those trainees who are placed outside of the state, Gram Tarang establishes an ongoing dialogue with trainees and monitors the post-placement labour conditions, to ensure that trainees are not being abused or exploited.

Research areas for potential growth and improvement

There is scope for Australian organisations or academics to research the social and economic impact of these
programs on the affected individuals, families and communities, including on those trainees who migrate to other parts of the country.

There is also potential for Indian institutions to learn from Australian experiences of working with refugee and migrant groups and others with low levels of literacy; working with disengaged learners; and using English language training materials with non-English speakers. It would be interesting to see whether some of the strategies and programs developed in Australia to meet the special challenges faced by these learners, could be replicated successfully in India.

Another possibility for collaborative research is on VET for indigenous peoples in Australia and Adivasi peoples (so called ‘tribal’ peoples) in India.

In Orissa, many Adivasi people grow up far from towns and cities, in economically and socially marginalised circumstances and with little exposure to formal education. Literacy and numeracy levels are generally low. Young persons from the ‘Scheduled Tribes’ may qualify for government sponsorship for VET programs, but go through a difficult social adjustment period. It is hoped that improved employment outcomes for young Adivasi students will contribute to improving social and economic wellbeing, and change attitudes in the broader community.

While Australian indigenous peoples and Adivasi tribes are very different, it is possible that there are lessons to be learnt by Indian institutions from Australian programs directed at delivering sustainable employment outcomes to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. The work of various VET organisations with indigenous Australians is under review by Centurion University.

As reported by NCVER, strategies in Australia have included building strong relationships between communities and business, providing ‘job related’ and culturally appropriate training, collaborating with indigenous leaders and the community, and providing holistic support (Giddy et al, 2009). The ‘success’ outcomes of VET for indigenous Australians (improving health and wellbeing, increasing self-esteem, meeting industry demands for skill and labour, creating a work ethic and developing role models) would be similar to those for Adivasi peoples.

Centurion University is exploring possibilities for partnerships with Australian researchers and institutions interested in investigating these fascinating issues further, on site in Orissa.
References


Further reading:


• National Skills Development Corporation website, http://www.nsdcindia.org/

• National Centre for Vocational Education Research website, http://www.ncver.edu.au
Author’s biography

Kate Waterford grew up in Canberra, and studied at the University of Sydney (Bachelor of Law and Bachelor of Arts) and at the University of New South Wales (Master of Commerce).

After some years of working in commercial litigation in Sydney, Kate transferred to Orissa in India, to work at Centurion University. Her responsibilities at the university have included lecturing in Legal Environments for Enterprises (Business Law) and in Financial Management; managing the introduction of the new dual degree program between Centurion University and the University of Southern Queensland; meeting with Australian universities and TAFEs to build up Centurion’s international partnerships; and working on many of the university’s projects in the development sector.

As the only foreigner working for the university, and one of only a handful of foreigners living in Orissa, there were many challenges in adjusting to life in Orissa, but also many rewards, including the fabulous Oriya cuisine.

Kate has a lifelong interest in training and education, shared by most of the people in her immediate family.