

East Gippsland Institute of TAFE

Angela Hutson, C.E.O.

Anne Rigg, Head of Hospitality and Service Industries



The Product

East Gippsland TAFE is one of Victoria's smaller TAFE institutions, yet it covers 14% of Victoria; from Yarram in South Gippsland, to Mallacoota in the far east and to Swifts Creek in the high country. Staff travel over 1.5 million kms a year to service the region.

It primarily offers Certificate 3 & 4 courses, plus some diploma courses, out of its 17 physical locations. It also offers a double diploma in events management and hospitality.

Training and consultancy services for the Corrections and for the Oil and Gas industries are the biggest earners. However, its client base is almost exclusively small business, including very small tourism and hospitality operators. Thirty eight per cent of its income is derived from non-government sources.

The Challenge

East Gippsland TAFE has faced many obstacles to become a leading vocational education and training provider; the size and diversity of its region, the relatively small population base to draw from, the competition in the training market and during the 1990s the danger of being merged by then State Government.. The region said it wanted to retain a viable, stand alone TAFE to service its needs, so it required a new, innovative approach to the delivery of services.

The provision of centralised courses could not work in such a large region. It's three hours from Mallacoota to Bairnsdale and 90 minutes from Yarram. Eighty five per cent of its clients employ fewer than five people, so the training provided needed to be business-specific rather than the 'off the shelf' programs that many larger institutions are able to cost-effectively provide.

The region also suffers from the loss of students after Year 12 to the bright lights of Melbourne, which students, secondary teachers and parents often think will provide better training and more work placement opportunities.

The Strategy

C.E.O. Angela Hutson says that every TAFE institute claims to be flexible and responsive to industry needs and that they customise to enterprise and customer needs.

" We also say it, but we're beyond the rhetoric. We have been successful in developing real partnerships in the community; working more closely with individual enterprises."

" We're at the opposite end of the spectrum to the large metropolitan institutions, so we're fairly risk tolerant in trying new approaches to meet the needs of the region."

" We have had to come up with quite innovative ways of delivering without having too many permanent full time staff and having people in cars all the time"

" We looked at the type of people we needed to recruit. Many TAFE teachers float around the system for 20 or 25 years. What we needed was a small core group of delivery and teaching staff, who could service a spectrum of regionally based mentors. These mentors could work in small communities as workplace trainers and assessors."

" As a result, we have employed and trained 15 to 20 part time people who were already accomplished in their own field. They generally work one or a few days a week for us and the rest of the time in their respective industries. They bring real, up to date experience to the classroom and, because they are small operators themselves, they know exactly what their students are going through and understand the challenges they face every day."

" We don't need to say to our training staff 'put yourselves in the business operator's shoes', because they are already there."

They also have people working full time for a period within specific workplaces. A pie maker was having trouble with its pastries, so TAFE's pastry cook worked there for a few weeks on the floor to assist them.

While Year 12 'exiting' students are not a large market for East Gippsland TAFE, the institute has developed a scheme that enables their tourism and hospitality students to undertake a three month work placement in Cairns. This helps to meet the student's need to get away from home, as well as providing a busy, stimulating work environment to hone their classroom skills.

The Institute has even changed the nature of its industry advisors. It no longer brings them together once a month to sit around a table with an agenda. They are now industry based people, from whom TAFE staff gain continual feedback through everyday contact.

As the Department Head for Hospitality and Service Industries, Anne Rigg visits businesses to develop a training plan to meet their needs.

"The operator doesn't want to read a prospectus to select from a range of standard training packages available and they don't necessarily want to know about national requirements. They are usually focussed on specific outcomes, rather than the training process to get there.

"Above all, they need it to be relevant to their business. We do a skills audit of staff, determine their level of prior learning and current competencies and then train to the skills gap with an individual training plan for every student.

"We provide the person with underpinning skills in the least disruptive way to the business because we're aware that taking someone out of the workplace even one day a week could mean that the business falls over.

"Training may not always be the right solution, but it may be part of the solution. It might also be recruitment procedures, or as simple as the cash register not meeting the needs of the business."

The Results

East Gippsland TAFE's new approach to workplace learning won it the title of Training Provider of the Year in 2006 and it was in the final three for the national award. Several clients of the hospitality department have also been state award winners, including Paul the Pieman from Yarram and Café Tsunami in Inverloch.

East Gippsland TAFE has developed Café Rossi, a fully commercial restaurant that operates in Sale CBD. It is used to refine the skills of the hospitality students following their basic training at the Fulham campus. The restaurant receives no funding from the Institute, charges full industry prices and must survive on its reputation. It has to compete on the same basis as any other restaurant in town.

Anne Rigg sits on the regional tourism marketing committee, Destination Gippsland and her department runs the new four day food and wine festival, 'Feast on the East'. It exposes the hospitality students to the wealth of regional produce and it provides the events management students with hands-on skills in running a major event.

To provide further experience for the events management students, the Institute tries to run at least four other events each year. This enables the students to see an event through from its concept on a piece of paper to the final execution. Rigg admits that it involves a lot of energy and time, that it's often stressful for the teachers and there is an element of financial risk, but it further reflects the Institute's commitment to its new approach to learning.

There are 120 other Registered Training Providers in a region of only 83000 people. It's a figure that surprises but doesn't daunt C.E.O. Angela Hutson:

" One of the reasons that we're regarded as successful is because we have differentiated ourselves. We are constantly finding and communicating how we are different to the other 119 RTOs.

" We communicate the message that we're committed to the social and economic development of this region, that we're here to stay, and that every dollar we spend stays in the region"

"TAFE is all about getting them a job and, ultimately, we are judged on the quality of our output."