



Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by John McKay JP – 2003 Churchill Fellow

Fellowship Report on the study of alternative approaches to the delivery of vocational education and training to thin student markets in regional communities.

Principle visits: United Kingdom, mainly Scotland

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Signed:*John McKay*..... Date: 6th July 2004

John McKay JP

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

“Education is what survives when what has been learnt has been forgotten.”

B.F. Skinner 1964

Summary

My Fellowship was undertaken to study alternative approaches to the delivery of vocational education and training to thin student markets in regional communities. This centred upon rural Scotland because of its similarity in systems and character.

Specific areas of study included:

- Models of delivery in VET to the many “pocket communities” in Scotland;
- Resources used and applied to maintain learning in regional communities;
- The support rendered and professional development of teaching staff
- Funding sources to sustain this type of provision in rural areas

This invaluable learning process would not have been possible without many people and groups.

- I am indebted to the Education Panel and Churchill Trust for allowing me the opportunity to experience, learn from and contribute to my field of endeavour.
- The support of colleagues at the South West Institute of TAFE generally, but also specifically senior management colleagues.
- Kaye Schofield (RMIT) Cr. Des Brown (former Mayor, Shire Southern Grampians), as well as colleagues and staff at SW TAFE, Hamilton Campus.
- My immediate and extended family, friends and my community;

In compiling this report I also have many Scottish folk to acknowledge for not only their advice and support prior to, during and following my Fellowship, but also for their genuine interest in my country; what I hoped to learn and the extremely warm reception I received despite their busy schedules.

In fact some very promising linkages were created during some of my visits.

Ms. Frances Bamber (SFEU, Stirling) and Ms. Gillian MacLellan (UHI, Inverness) deserve particular thanks and heart-felt appreciation for their support. Both supplied advice prior to my arrival, outstanding organisational skills in arranging and co-ordinating my visits, accommodation and travel details.

I also express my gratitude to those listed on page 5 for their time, frank discussions, their on-going interest in this fellowship and that which might flow from it.

Executive Summary

The major lesson learned was that the Scottish system operates so well for several factors, some of which are not readily transposed in Australia. In short, these are: -

- A smaller, more compact geography;
- Extensive public transport system supporting rural areas;
- A simplified funding regime;
- Flatter bureaucratic support structure;
- A supportive relationship between Further Education and Higher Education (University) sectors;
- European funding opportunities, though this will soon become restricted;
- Millennium lottery project funding

These macro factors appear to make the Further and Higher Education systems function and perform at an enviable level. But equally, these attributes are supported by a range of other aspects which might be applicable to Australia:

- Local Learning Centres in key rural annexes
- Much wider use of affordable video conferencing in Learning Centres
- Greater emphasis on professional development of staff
- Coupling of higher and further education teaching roles, precipitating higher staff qualifications;
- Wider understanding and support for ‘blended learning’ models and initiatives

These points and more were brought home to me by example time and time again, where ever and whom ever I visited. There was almost a palatable perception of a universal understanding and acceptance of what the further education system was doing and attempting to achieve, but this may simply have been due to the similarities of the colleges and universities visited.

It also struck me that there was an international opportunity for knowledge sharing, job swaps and to develop a wider understanding of innovations and practices in vocational education that would advantage both countries and generate a collective and on-going benefit across many disciplines.

This could be achieved by promulgating the expressions of interest from the many Scottish contacts regarding exchange through Institutes and various publications.

As many FE staff had sought and been supported in gaining higher qualifications including doctorates, the obligation to base their research in and for the benefit of vocational practices, had a ready and tangible application that I found inspiring.

Clearly this would require a greater investment in staff development by our institute’s and especially funding bodies/governments than might presently prevail, as the exponential benefits and investment across the sector would seem considerable.

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Programme

I was fortunate to be able to hold productive discussions with the following people at their respective organisations: -

Mr Miles Scrivens, Chief Lecturer, Braintree College, Essex, England

Scottish Further Education Unit: (SFEU)

Ms. Alison Reid, CEO

Mr. John McCann Depute CEO

Mr. Don Bowman Head of Centre for College Development

Ms Jennie Baillie Head of Centre for Learning Effectiveness

Ms. Alison Bamber, Administration and Special Projects

Mr. Glen Cook, Head of Marketing & Business Development

Mr. Jim Ross, Leadership and Management Development

Ms. Nancy Cooper – Lead Specialist, Learning Process

Ms. Sandy Maclean, Projects Manager

Ms. Jean Henderson, E-College Advisor and Learning Centre Development officer

Ms. Lorraine Glen SWELL Project Manager

UHI Millennium Institute (UHI)

Ms Jenny Tizard, Academic Registrar, UHI Executive Office, Inverness

Ms. Gillian MacLellan, Academic Registry Team UHI Executive Office

Ms Caitriona Maciver, Assistant Registrar Quality UHI Executive Office

Dr. Axel Miller, Scot. Assoc. Marine Sciences, UHI Oban

Mr. Dan MacLeod CEO Lochaber College

Mr. Mike Breslin, CEO Argyll College

Ms Elma Armstrong, Cairndow Learning Centre

Dr. Michael Webster, Principal, Perth College

Ms. Mandy Exley, Head of Faculty, Business Systems and Services

Ms. Pam Wilson, Curriculum Support Manager

Ms Liz Jeffress, PA to Principal

Ms. Angela Gillies Marketing Officer, Sabhal Mor Ostaig (SMO), Isle of Skye

Ms. Nicola Mackay (Nicola NicAoidh) PA to Principal, SMO Isle of Skye

Ms Josie McMillan, Unst Learning Centre/Telecroft

Mr Gordon Dargie, Director, Shetland College, Lerwick

Mr Simon Clarke, Blended Learning Co-ordinator Shetland College, Lerwick

Mr Peter Dryburgh, Director Nth Atlantic Fisheries College, Scalloway, Shetland

Mr Duncan Kidson, Curriculum Co-ordinator

Mr David Green, Principal Lews Castle College, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis

Dr. Frank Rennie, School of Sustainable Rural Development, Lews Castle College

Other FE Providers who service Rural Communities

Ms. Christina Potter, Principal Elmwood College, [Cupar, Fife]

Ms. Diane Rawlinson, Assistant Principal Elmwood College

Mr. Ian Butcher, Elmwood College

Mr John Burt, Principal Angus College, Arbroath

Ms. Cath Ferrie, Director of Learning & Teaching

Mr. Bill Watt, Director of Learning & Teaching

Dr. John Bhoyrub, Dundee University

Report

Context

I am employed by South West Institute of TAFE which operates three campuses, Warrnambool, Portland and Hamilton, having as its 'local patch' the second largest area in Victoria, but a rather dispersed and thin population outside of these centres.

Working as the Head of Campus at Hamilton, Victoria it is evident that teaching vocational education courses has many joys and memorable moments.

Equally however, it can be frustrating when people who need and want to study are unable to do so. The reasons for this are wide and varied but principally include: -

- Inability to travel to a campus – limited or no public transport;
- Lagging infra structure – slow and unreliable private internet connections;
- Diversity of needs – insufficient numbers to conduct classes economically;
- Economically and geographically isolated – low discretionary income
- Inability to access information on course options

Colleagues across the TAFE system and more locally have considered alternative approaches, investigated a host of innovative delivery models and explored international practices in search of ways to overcome these obstacles.

Scotland and Canada both operate highly successful systems and have comparable geography and demographics. Canadian contacts suggested that they closely monitor the Scottish system as it demonstrated exceptionally high student, business and community satisfaction and graduate levels.

Clearly, worthwhile lessons could be gleaned from their experience. The Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) and the UHI Millennium Institute (UHI) were found to be the most appropriate sources of advice.

To compare Scotland to Australia would be a meaningless exercise so I have confined my analysis between the former and Victoria.

Comparisons	Scotland	Victoria
Population	5 million	4.8 million
Land Mass	81,610 sq km	227,590 sq km
Av income (AUD)	\$54,250*	\$20,800#

[* = Scot Census 2001 £21,700 x 2.5] [# = ABS 2001 census]

[I was unable to locate data on provide cost of living comparisons to better reflect the disproportionate differential in average per capita income levels.]

With topography similar to that of Victoria, Scotland operates some 46 Further Education Colleges. Additionally there are approximately 80 Learning Centres operated by voluntary, public and private organisations in the Highlands & Islands.

Victoria has 18 TAFE institutes (funded by ANTA & OTTE) and some 450 ACFE providers, but these may not necessarily be supported or linked in any structured way.

Both countries have in common statistics that demonstrate the majority of students are part time and that they operate campuses (as distinct from Learning Centres).

The Scottish Experience

The unique role of the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) in Stirling appeared to bring under one umbrella, the role of several of Australia's or Victoria's authorities.

At the heart of its Mission is to “... *help create a world class FE system ...; to lead colleges in the development of their staff, services and standards both as a centre of expertise and as a forum for the exchange of ideas and sharing of best practice.*”

Whilst this over-arching responsibility was at times begrudgingly referred to by some Colleges, the value of SFEU to them was never a question.

Their ability to ‘vision’, plan, co-opt/recruit college staff, provide services and to broker training opportunities around the system, added an invaluable edge of innovation and enterprise to the vocational network.

Equally, their role as the unique liaison with and understanding of European academia as well as accessing local funding sources enabled them to generate training for partner colleges yet also act as the lead organisation for new initiatives in the field.

Indeed, these vital linkages enabled them to be ideally placed to do so and invariably positioned them at the forefront, if not the catalyst for any and all opportunities.

The UHI example is also a worthwhile one. They have developed Higher Education opportunities utilising Further Education College infra-structure and staff resources.

The duplication of a FE system underpinning and enabling a HE system in areas outside of Scotland's “main belt” is primarily supported by the HE sector because most Universities are unable to service the numbers attempting to gain access to their campuses. As the UHI website (www.uhi.ac.uk) describes:

“UHI Millennium Institute is the only higher education institution based in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Through a partnership of fifteen colleges and research institutions and network of more than 50 local learning centres, UHI makes it easier for people to take part in quality higher education across the Highlands and Islands.

“Students, lecturers, colleges, research institutions and learning centres are part of an advanced high-speed electronic network, providing access to university-level education throughout the region.

“UHI students normally study at a college or learning centre. Many take classes at large and busy campuses, while others access their courses through smaller learning centres in some of Britain's most remote communities. Their tutors and classmates may be miles away, but trained staff will usually be nearby to give advice and help.

“Degree courses are validated by the Open University Validation Services (OUVS) and quality assured by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Higher National Awards are made under the auspices of the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA).”

It was evident that UHI was particularly well regarded by its counterparts in the “main belt” and for its unique structures and efficient operations.

Both these organisations, SFEU and UHI were welcoming and keen to share their knowledge with Australia, which enjoys a considerable degree of credibility in that part of the world and across the United Kingdom generally.

Issues in Rural Australia:

The subject of accessible and more user friendly education for all, not just rural people is a hot topic in the system, Australia wide.

Indeed it is seen as an unquestionable right.

In some quarters the proposed solution has been the delivery of courses on-line but these are often fragmented. Access to computing facilities is not always possible due to personal economic constraints and ISP's generally offer unreliable and slow connection speeds. Broadband is not universally available and where it is, can be cost prohibitive for many rural residents.

For those who find the course they want and commence study, completion rates by e-learning processes alone are generally low and satisfaction rare, for students and teachers alike though improvements have recently been witnessed. These have been primarily due the teaching professional being allowed to acknowledge that online learning is not for everyone.

They have established that individual learning styles of the student is a key criteria in determining the suitability of the online learning environment

On line education has not been the panacea that some policy makers might have initially expected and a major re-think on student study needs may be appropriate. This fact has been the subject of quite some review by our Scottish contemporaries. The Professional Lecturer in 2014 – SFEU Discussion Paper, March 2004; Page 7, quoting a Tom Kelly Broadcast magazine articulates the following:

“Until the dot.com bubble burst, many enthusiasts thought that off-campus learning would take over. In 1999 some were even saying that the e-learning revolution would be in full swing by 2003. No one today is so gung ho.”

“It is probably the case that online learning (in the form of distance learning delivered electronically) is unlikely by itself to be very popular as a way of delivering full time FE course for existing client groups. For many students the social aspect of studying is significant, both in the sense of wanting or needing to be taught directly for at least part of the time, rather than only self-studying, and in terms of wanting to interact with other students Research into what students enjoyed most about their first few days in one college undictated that for all age groups it was ‘meeting new people’. Colleges ignore this at their peril. A virtual chat-room or community of learners is unlikely easily to replace the real thing.”¹

The Discussion Paper continues this theme on the following page; ref Jim Ross:

“For most, IT will not by itself be the chosen method of learning – but it never the less has an important role as one aspect of a ‘blended’ approach to learning, appropriately integrated with other means of learning.”¹

The blended learning model is gaining some recognition in Australia but has developed from our own experiences with on-line learning and teaching. How better would we and students have now been were we able to have known earlier of the UK experiences in this domain?

The Search for Knowledge

“Teaching is in a sense the essential profession as it makes all the others possible.”¹

Jim Ross SFEU

At Perth College the Principal Dr. Michael Webster, noted that Scotland has the Deputy First Minister, The Hon Jim Wallace QC, Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning as a MSP (Member of the Scottish Parliament) indicating the importance attached to education in their country.

Perth services seven village Learning Centres all linked by computer and video conferencing to support this blended learning understanding.

This enables Perth College to support students studying across six Higher Education degrees, including Masters’ level qualifications in Personal Development as well as Tourism. The latter course is supported by a mentor who also provides admin support to students and who is accessible on-line most of the time.

Mandy Exley, Head of Faculty, Business Systems and Services at Perth noted that UHI has a very strong social inclusion policy and it is committed to overcoming inhibitors to access in rural areas and to the sustainability of Learning Centres.

This was largely the story where ever I went in Scotland, especially in the Shetland Islands and Outer Hebrides; an unwavering social policy, very well supported by the means to guarantee its purpose, mindful of but not driven by economic imperatives.

As a contrast however, the highly regarded Argyll College is not at all what I expected. The “college” is barely one bungalow style building at Dunoon yet operates 10 other centres throughout Argyll.

On the opposite side of the Clyde River to Port Glasgow I was quite inspired by the discussions I was fortunate to have with the Director of Argyll College Mr. Michael Breslin; a further and higher education college that operates very successfully without very much infra structure at all.

Mr. Breslin was originally seconded from the local enterprise company to compile a brief on a Further Education college to service the Argyll region.

Effectively starting with a “green field site” and being fully aware of the proximity to Glasgow’s many training opportunities, he determined that considerable costs were associated with generating and maintaining a college site in the traditional mould.

Looking at the needs analysis undertaken by a private group, it appeared the area was not meeting the FE needs of a disbursed population in and around Argyll, but a business plan required that it be centred upon a different model completely. It was noted that Telford & Perth Colleges were the two largest open learning centres and Argyll College affiliated initially with the latter to provide some servicing.

So a remote tutorial model was commenced which had the benefit of utilising existing teachers and established protocols with a well established college that could support a broad subject range and enrol students any time of the year.

But the open learning model was inefficient and did not meet client or student needs as the onus was always on the student to initiate and then maintain contact.

Some changes were implemented and the system was redesigned with tutor focus on developing a learning plan for each student before any (part) payment was made and subsequent payments were based upon student contributions in a staged manner

The Argyll College model developed and continued to evolve to where it handles its own enrolment and awards but efficiently brokers' high quality training and student support with a variety of institutions or contracts its own where needed.

Yet Argyll College also supports a learning centre at Cairndow, strategically positioned between 3 villages to service student needs'.

This LC was similar to many others, including Unst in the far flung Shetland Islands the northern most of that archipelago, with its own unique set of access problems.

The learning centre managed by Josie McMillan featured a dozen computers, reference CD access, broadband and video conferencing to service a community relatively isolated but still able encourage and meet the training needs of its people.

But as Ms McMillan and her Board of Management Chair Mrs. Mouatt noted, the process of remote learning is more than just having good equipment. Obtaining good teaching and support skills in isolated and rural areas is harder to obtain.

This was underscored by Dr Frank Rennie of Lews Castle College Stornoway (Isle of Lewis) in his paper the "Use of Flexible Learning Resources for Geographically Distributed Rural Students; Distance Education Vol 24, no. 1 Carfax Publishing 2003.

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"There is ... general agreement that the use of ICTs is fundamentally changing both the student-tutor interaction and the teaching and learning process itself ² (quoted from McAlister et al., 2001; Wheeler, 2001)

So the Argyll College experience, though vastly different in form to its peers, is able to provide quality education and support, through a completely different, but equally (at the very least) successful process, based upon a widespread co-operative ethos.

This feature really stood out in contrast to our Victorian system. Even though Scotland has many more colleges, the links between them seem more supportive and certainly less competitive than in Australia.

Perhaps the Scottish system had not been turned on its head as the Victorian system was in the 1990's when private VET providers were introduced, fostering a highly competitive market which certainly served to generate efficiencies but at a cost.

The UHI concept it would seem not only reinforces the Argyll model but actively reflects and fosters this mutually supportive and quality framework. That system was able to catalogue shortcomings in the delivery models and co-operative solutions were sought, with good effect.

These experiences and information sharing enabled corrections to occur across the system, rather than in individual colleges, facilitating a common benefit to staff, colleges and students. This is amply illustrated by Rennie² again below, in areas many of our institutes are still coming to terms with:

Page 30:

"... increasing pressure has been placed on the (expanded) video conferencing facilities, with correspondingly greater stress being placed upon equipment and staff. This is a common theme in online course development... that the problems associated with course management (as distinct from tuition) are consistently underestimated and under-resourced ..." ²

And later on page 36 –

"It has become apparent that delivery styles are not as critical as student support mechanisms, and that the adoption of several different methods of staff-student contact are preferable to placing all trust in a single medium of technology." ²

It would seem that such a return to a system where common problems are shared, explored and solved with a systemic benefit would further enhance quality outcomes for all stakeholders.

An encouraging sign is independent evaluation of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework which suggests enormous growth in flexible learning and e-learning throughout Australia's VET system over the past five years, but again focuses principally upon e-learning in isolation from other integrated approaches. ⁵

This however did not resonant with the 2003 findings of Sue Kilpatrick and Helen Bound in their paper 'Learning Online: Benefits and Barriers in Regional Australia' ⁶

Perhaps this underscores the unfortunate disparity of perception in an otherwise wonderfully valuable asset in Australia's VET profile.

As noted at the introductory page, some linkages between Australia and Scottish services were initiated during my visits and these suggest some sustainable potential if a will and a process prevails to ensure they are continued, fostered and further developed for mutual benefit.

Conclusions

Overview

Australia has much to commend it in terms of its delivery of vocational training generally and we are well regarded internationally for some of our innovativeness, not the least being in certain areas of the e-learning sector.

Victoria especially, despite widespread acceptance that it is the most tightly funded system, has achieved a good deal in this regard. However in rural areas there are considerable opportunities open to our Institute's by learning from the experiences of colleagues in other parts of the world.

Professional Development and Research

Without an applied research component as part of its professional development and operational review, TAFE has no meaningful basis of evaluating its present or its future directions. There is little opportunity for the fostering of new ideas, approaches or knowledge sharing in a holistic way.

What happens in our system is dictated and driven from government policy and enacted by the various authorities charged with the responsibility to make it happen. Those at the institute level know that some of these initiatives will not work or lead to the degeneration of quality in the system.

No creditable nexus exists between policy and decision makers and teachers, where innovative and entrepreneurial practices can be identified, supported and trialled. What teachers know and experience is not outwardly harvested, analysed or applied, something that appears a major travesty. In our TAFE system there is a considerable number of vocationally knowledgeable and academically intelligent staff with a plethora of acquired and applied knowledge that is undervalued and ultimately lost.

At a time when the use of resources and sustainability is to the fore in our daily lives, the loss of a diverse and invaluable array of knowledge could be 'recycled' into teacher training programs or made accessible on-line. Professional email support might also be provided by retired teachers as "consultant" mentors.

ICT

As established in my report body, the Scottish system of ICT and blended learning practice is a model which we might emulate here at least in relative parts.

Their greater experiences in dealing with the range of issues surrounding alternative delivery methods and pedagogy are further advanced than we are in some areas. We can learn a good deal about the intricacies and underpinning support required without having to discover them all through trial and error.

Other

On a personal level and in spite of the advice provided by Trust officers at the briefing sessions, I undertook too many visits which severely tested my physical and intellectual stamina towards the end of my Fellowship. However it is difficult when such a unique opportunity presents to not want to maximise contacts.

Recommendations

INTERNATIONAL LINKAGES

It is apparent that Australia cannot continue to be isolated in terms of what occurs in other more experienced parts of the world and in fact, a good deal can be learned from the fluency and expertise of other countries.

But in the same context there is much that Australia has that it can export in terms of the specialist knowledge and skills we have acquired in operating successfully in a number of educational and training package areas.

Whilst our geographic isolation from the rest of the world is often seen as a benefit to us developing and forging our own way, we should not allow in this day and age the excuse of distance to remain isolated from what is happening in key parts of the educational world.

I would like to see our authorities develop a much stronger commitment to liaison and information exchange with similar VET systems overseas. Dissemination of this data, including experiences and problems could foster direct linkages and has potential to generate Australian training opportunities other than just simply importing students.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND STAFF EXCHANGE

As previously alluded to in various parts of my report and specifically International Linkages (above), there would certainly seem a wonderful professional and personal potential to exchange, visit, interact and job swap with other countries.

Some institutes are already intermittently involved in this very concept.

It would be interesting to see if the VET system could in itself sponsor such exchanges in association with the SFEU, at various levels, as the exponential considerations would clearly be invaluable to both countries.

In Australia or at least Victoria where my experience is based, fostering a greater level of systemic problem sharing and solution by teachers and administrators involved at institute level would also generate better outcomes.

Similarly, some worthwhile input to the ebb and flow of policy decisions in the VET sector by those “at the coal-face”, though perhaps conceptually idealistic and not politically astute, would be desirable as long as it was not done in a token manner.

This might lead to a longer and more sustainable vision for the sector which can only bring better outcomes to all involved, including governments, especially if a wider pool of international knowledge and understanding are inclusive of it.

GREATER LINKAGES

TAFE and ACFE

The linkages that exist between TAFE and other providers such as ACFE, at least in Victoria are largely unstructured and blurred. Where public monies are being expended for vocational and personal development purposes, there appears at least superficially for an opportunity to work more closely together and potentially saving duplication of infra-structure and costs.

Conversely it could be argued the reality that the state funded ACFE system runs so well in so many centres is because it is not burdened by much of the confining limitations of such a tightly regulated TAFE system.

A comparative study of what both systems have in common and could bring together for the better access to and for students/clients might also articulate the areas where limitations to greater co-operation might be identified and resolved.

TAFE and HE

Whilst in Victoria a number of Universities have TAFE components, there does seem an opportunity to develop a more co-operative relationship than might otherwise be evident, at least in terms of using existing infra-structure and staff.

Just how this could be achieved I am not qualified to say but the relationships between UHI (and its partner colleges) and other Scottish Universities was certainly enviable.

It might follow that TAFE teaching staff would seek higher qualifications which would benefit their professional prospects, especially if any research component of that study could be categorically aligned to generating a TAFE related benefit.

BLENDED LEARNING

The earlier expectations of on-line learning as an educational process in itself have not been realised and with broader consultation with staff may have been addressed much earlier.

It would appear that a greater level of data on how people learn, why they want to learn and the better methods of facilitating it has evolved in recent times, more by trial and error than by research measures.

In rural areas particular considerations must be made in terms of supporting class sizes, course options and how to economically provide responsive choices. It follows that a greater investment (as opposed to a cost view) needs to be pursued.

“... students learn most effectively if they are also supported as individuals to achieve personal development”³

Such blended learning and teaching practices of other countries coupled with our own successes and enterprise can help us maintain a positive international standing.

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<http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au>
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<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/960.html>

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Acronyms

ACFE – Adult Community Further Education (Australia)
ANTA – Australian National Training Authority
FE – Further Education (Scotland)
HE – Higher Education (Scotland)
ICT – Information & Communication Technology
LC – Learning Centre (Scotland)
OTTE – Office of Training and Tertiary Education (Victoria)
SFEU – Scottish Further Education Unit
RMIT – Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (Australia)
TAFE – Technical and Further Education (Australia)
UHI – UHI Millennium Institute (Scotland)
VET – Vocational Education and Training