



Using Tutor Hubs as a Spotlight on Quality and Consistency



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Tutor Hubs bring together specialist tutors and the company's Academic Manager, Resource Manager, and Moderator to focus on a single area of training. This cross-organisation approach to improving quality and consistency uses the experience and expertise of the different members, maximising the benefits of collaboration. The practice has improved the learning experience for students, and ensures the skills and knowledge they gain are equipping them appropriately for the workplace.

Introduction

In 2004 Agribusiness Training Ltd introduced Tutor Hubs as a means of improving the consistency and quality of training across six nationwide branches. This was to move away from each branch delivering its own interpretation of a course or qualification, without a central focus on the quality of what was delivered or the training resources used.

Tutor Hubs discuss and review the theory, practical, administrative, and compliance aspects of training by considering course composition, delivery practices, assessments, and marking schedules. The aim is to produce training resources, practical activities, and assessments that meet the unit standard descriptors while using wording and style accessible to students.

Tutor Hubs bring together specialist tutors and the company's Academic Manager, Resource Manager, and Moderator to focus on a single area of training. This cross-organisation approach to improving quality and consistency uses the experience and expertise of the different members, maximising the

benefits of collaboration. To ensure best practice, all participants have input into improvements and review recommendations.

Tutor Hubs in Practice

Focus

Agribusiness Training provides training for students predominantly already working in land-based industries. The training students receive needs to give them skills and knowledge that are useful and relevant to their workplace. It needs to be up to date and of quality, so students are appropriately equipped.

With Agribusiness Training's Head Office in Invercargill and training radiating out from regional branches in Hamilton, Hastings, Christchurch, Ashburton, Timaru, and Invercargill, Tutor Hubs are held in Christchurch. Having a major airport nearby makes it easier to bring tutors to one venue from around the country. Christchurch also has a variety of land-based production in close proximity from which to source venues for reviewing the practical aspects of training.

The first Tutor Hubs focused on training courses with high enrolments and high safety risks, including Chainsaw Skills, 4WD Driving Skills, and Tree Felling. Now, six Tutor Hubs are run each year prioritised on the basis of high enrolments, identified issues, and changes such as the review of qualifications or unit standards by an ITO, or the introduction of a new delivery area.

Logistics

Before a Tutor Hub, the Academic Team reviews the assessment documentation for the course. Often they select a lead tutor to work with them who demonstrates good training practices and has extensive technical knowledge in the subject area. If unit standards have been changed, the Academic Team will identify where documentation changes are required. If there is an identified issue with delivery or assessment, the Team collects information on current practice and considers options for change. Suggested changes are distributed before the Tutor Hub to all those attending.

Agribusiness Training's Moderator moderates current assessment activities and marking schedules against the unit standards being reviewed. The moderation report informs the Tutor Hub's discussion about assessment suitability. Robust discussion takes place at the Tutor Hub, culminating in group agreement of improvements to assessments and marking schedules. During discussions, tutors constantly refer back to how things would work with students.

All documentation agreed at the Tutor Hub is subsequently drafted by the Academic Team, sent to the attending tutors for final comment, and then uploaded to Agribusiness Training's internal resources' website which branches use for delivery. This ensures consistency of resources across all sites and tutors.

Tutor Hubs run across either 2 or 3 days, depending on the number of unit standards to be reviewed. The first day focuses on theory aspects of the training, and the remainder focuses on practical activities and setting standards for their assessment. Practical activities and assessments are refined by running through options out in the field, mirroring the teaching situation.

Theory Aspects

1. Tutors share how training is delivered at each site to highlight how time is allocated to different activities, and the delivery hours involved.
2. In pairs, tutors moderate a sample of post-assessment scripts, and compare these with the Moderator's comments. Any issues such as questions that students have difficulty interpreting or that don't closely match the unit standard are identified. These, along with the Academic Team's suggestions, provide the basis for changes.
3. A "Minimum Resources List" required for delivery is created.
4. Course activities that might require an additional assistant tutor are discussed, and agreed minimum tutor:student ratios set.
5. Course-specific "Health and Safety Procedures" are written, outlining points to be covered with students at each practical training session, e.g., hazards of the venue, how to manage them, and emergency procedures. Tutor:student ratios for practical sessions are set and guidelines are discussed for the delivery of theory sessions.
6. All teaching resources, including power points, models, and interactive equipment, are reviewed. Tutors discuss the teaching resources they use and make them more effective by reformatting, inserting improvements or adding new items. Improving tutors' teaching skills takes priority over reviewing student study notes, as they are supplementary to direct teaching.
7. Teaching practices where literacy or numeracy challenges exist are discussed as they arise, with tutors sharing how they work through these challenges. Some of the solutions used include changing the wording used in assessments, document formatting or the amount of space allocated for writing.

Practical Aspects

1. Techniques for teaching and managing practical delivery are demonstrated and discussed.
2. Delivery of practical activities at each site is compared and discussed, focusing on the level of complexity required and aspects that can be unclear or challenging.
3. The detail in practical tasks and competency levels that must be demonstrated for a student to meet the standard are discussed and agreed.
4. Marking schedules are reviewed and amended to ensure these clearly indicate the standard needed to achieve competence for a specific task. This includes the student tasks to be demonstrated, and the steps and components needed to achieve the standard.
5. In small groups, marking schedules for new practical assessment activities are written. These are then critiqued by the group and used to develop common marking schedules.

Facilitation Techniques

The ideal Tutor Hub size for group dynamics to be most effective is 8–10 people, which may limit the numbers attending to two tutors per branch. The group needs to be large enough so diverse tutor experience and a range of sites are represented, but small enough so everyone can have input. This maximises the possible benefits of cross-fertilisation from collective expertise across the organisation.

The Tutor Hub operates in a non-threatening environment so tutors actively participate and collaborate; as a result they feel their expertise is recognised and valued as a resource. Some of the ways this environment is created are: varying working group sizes so tutors get to work with different people, and

find it easier to have input; actively ensuring all have a chance to speak and not just the most confident people; and using lead tutors to run some sessions.

Tutor Hubs also deliberately model good tutoring practices, e.g., varying the style and type of activity so they are not all talking based; demonstrating techniques that stop people talking over each other while allowing all to have a say; nipping inappropriate comments in the bud; pulling discussion back to keep it on task; displaying the day's programme so participants know when breaks occur; using a whiteboard Parking Space for ideas to follow up later; intermingling more and less interesting activities where possible; adhering to break and finishing times.

"I feel very comfortable interacting at a Tutor Hub. It is the way it is facilitated, everyone is given a fair chance to have a say. The facilitator has to be able to hear what I am saying, and get done what needs to be done as well." - Invercargill tutor

Any new delivery is priority for a Tutor Hub, so standards are set from the outset.

"Fencing was quite good as it felt like we were putting input right from the beginning... There are a whole lot of new units, so we had input from day one into what we want to get out, what we are going to cover, and what was put into the questions." - Hamilton tutor

Be aware of the need to take frequent breaks. Have a team building-focused activity after lunch if time allows, as that is when participants can feel sluggish.

Benefits of the Practice

Benefits to Agribusiness Training Ltd

Relationships between tutors and Agribusiness Training's Academic Team are strengthened, as understanding of what the other does improves.

"Tutor Hubs have changed my relationship with tutors considerably. Discussion is much easier face-to-face, so it makes communication a whole lot easier. I get a huge understanding of a subject from listening to them, and I get to understand exactly where they are coming from. I can gauge a whole lot easier what standard they are working to from listening to them talk amongst themselves. It is very difficult to get that from written material. It makes moderating so much easier, particularly with practical assessments. It is incredibly useful." Moderator

The consistency and quality of training offered to students across the country is improved.

"You get a perspective outside your own on what is acceptable, a better or best method, industry standards of what's required, any little techniques people have developed to do things, take on board hints or techniques others have, so you come away better equipped. There are little teaching tips another person does that could help you. We are putting together a consensus, so we are taking back a consensus of ideas. Then we are teaching from a perspective that anyone could step in and do it." - Hamilton tutor

The Tutor Hub approach ensures “buy in” of the outcomes from tutors, as it captures their expertise to develop and improve resources and practices. The positive impact of this is improved teaching and delivery.

“Especially the good Tutor Hubs, really made you a bit more aware, a bit more confident as the guys agreed what you are doing is right, or that you shouldn’t have been doing something and will try to stop it. I like to think everyone is working off the same music sheet. Tutor Hubs setting up courses give you the feeling you have had input into these courses, and then you can’t complain too much as any screw ups are yours.” - Hamilton tutor

The close connections of tutors with industry’s best practices help ensure course content is relevant and current, as this knowledge is being captured.

“North Island fencing is different from South Island fencing due to types of soil and country, so we needed to make sure there were variations in assessments to cope with different types of country. It was a big help having people from all over the country...In particular when we went outside and did the practical day. You could see in front of you the difference between good and very good.” - Timaru tutor

Tutors gain an understanding of the moderation process, why standards need to be set and moderated, and the amount of leeway possible in accepting alternative answers or different ways of assessing something. Tutors are more accepting of moderation, and more confident in their part.

“We come together and can standardise things and put it together into blocks to deliver, we can see where tutors are at in the way they are doing things. We can measure ourselves against each other, create packages which suit the topic, and have country-wide standardised delivery and assessing. You are also confident in knowing what you have set as the standard is the same as elsewhere in the country, and if work is not good enough you know it.” - Hamilton tutor

Cohesiveness and morale across Agribusiness Training is strengthened as tutors realise there are others with similar backgrounds and experiences getting similar feedback from students. Tutor Hubs establish networks between tutors, meaning they have others with whom to discuss aspects of training.

“I like it because we are talking to people who are doing the same kind of stuff.” - Hamilton tutor

The successful Tutor Hub model is adapted for other purposes like training new tutors, or preparing to pilot new initiatives. In November 2008 a “New Tutor Hub” was introduced, where new tutors from any area of training come together. These will occur biannually, and will discuss: being an Agribusiness Training tutor; academic systems and how these can be accessed; the Academic Team and its role in assisting tutors; teaching tools and kits; where to go when needing assistance; adhering to delivery hours; learning styles; questioning skills; managing resources and copyright; how new initiatives are developed; assessment methods; marking tips; ways of gathering evidence; delivering practical training; marking schedules; and moderation.

Benefits to Tutors

Tutors develop networks with others tutoring in the same subject, as they are often the only ones in their branch. These networks develop through the Tutor Hub activities, and also through socialising over

meals. Tutors value the collegial support these networks bring – they have others for advice, ideas, support, and are less likely to feel isolated or stressed.

“One of the problems with this game is that we don’t get the opportunity to cross-reference. It is really important to be able to cross-reference with those other people within the company.” - Hamilton tutor

Tutors are often not from an educational background, and so Tutor Hubs are a non-threatening way for them to improve their training skills. These develop as tutors share ideas, look at ways of improving delivery, and set standards of training together.

“We are all on the same channel, and have the same interests as we are doing similar things. It is a bit like a brainstorm when you bring us together, you get so many more ideas than just what you do on your own.” - Christchurch tutor

Benefits to Learners

Tutor Hubs improve the quality of resources, activities, delivery, and assessment methods, which leads to better learning outcomes. The calibre of training improves as tutors are able to bounce ideas off each other, learn from others’ experience, and utilise the networks they establish to problem solve issues that arise.

“Definitely a lot of little tricks picked up, mainly fine tuning. It means you can do a really professional job and a good job.” - Timaru tutor

“We are writing an assessment that fits the training structure. We are then confident that the theory and practical are going to be working together. Because we are better equipped in teaching and delivery techniques the students benefit from someone more capable in getting it across.” - Hamilton tutor

Tutors are better equipped in how to approach students with literacy or numeracy needs.

“It gets frustrating, but has huge benefit as we have input into the way assessments are written, e.g., how a question is written, so it is easier to understand for a less literate person.” - Invercargill tutor

Cross-fertilisation across the organisation from the differing industry experience of the participants ensures training remains current.

“Like techniques for starting a chainsaw. It varied quite a bit before the Tutor Hub, there was quite a bit of discussion, and we came out with how best to do it. Lots have been in the industry for a long time, but things change. Tutor Hub is getting up to date with the modern and required techniques.” - Invercargill tutor

Training issues identified through student or tutor feedback are discussed and addressed in a Tutor Hub, e.g., assessment issues arose in the 4WD Driving course and were resolved this way.

Conclusion

Tutor Hubs have been a key factor in creating a company culture of quality and consistency of training. This has improved the learning experience for students, and ensures the skills and knowledge they gain are equipping them appropriately for the workplace.



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