

# The NSW Tech Savvy for Small Business Program: A Review by Community Colleges Australia 28 March 2018

## Background

The NSW Government's Tech Savvy for Small Business (TSB) Program allocated funding to NSW Adult and Community Education (ACE) providers in late June 2017 for the 2017/18 financial year. Totalling \$1.8 million, the program is incorporated into the Smart and Skilled CSO funding agreements with NSW ACE providers, and is designed to support small businesses' ability to manage technology through the provision of short, targeted training – 80% of which is accredited. The program guidelines identify business, information technology and foundation skills training packages as relevant to the training.

The program came unexpectedly with limited guidance or support from the NSW Department of Industry (the Department). Community Colleges Australia (CCA) acknowledges and appreciates that the Department created the program at short notice, without extensive planning time prior to funding becoming available.

The program has extensive and broad opportunities for both the target groups and for ACE providers to develop targeted skills and to work in new ways. The program also fits well with the NSW ACE sector, whose providers are agile and flexible, able to respond quickly to changing community needs, developing local programs that address local challenges; understand how to work collaboratively with the NSW Government in achieving training and employment goals; and frequently work with business, industry and other community stakeholders. The TSB program is particularly beneficial in outer metropolitan, regional and rural areas where access to digital skills is often (erroneously) perceived as 'city' centric or 'too hard' for small business people to master.

CCA has had discussions with the Department to assist with the evaluation and the roll out of the TSB program. To share good practice and the TSB experiences of NSW ACE providers, CCA undertook a member survey, utilising both face to face and online tools to help document the content delivered, the approaches utilised and implementation barriers experienced by member organisations.

This paper has been compiled to provide feedback to the NSW Department of Industry about the TSB's operations, and to present the case for the program's continuation and expansion into the 2018/19 financial year and beyond.

## Summary of Findings

- There is both appetite from providers and scope for the continuation of this program under the CSO ACE program in 2018/19 and subsequent funding years. Providers report good outcomes across the state.
- The limited notice, size, and nature of the TSB program has affected the level of time and investment by most providers in innovative training and delivery models.

- Both the content and target groups of the program provide challenges for many providers given the new content for some providers and/or new target audiences.
- Both provider size and vision appear to have a marked impact on organisational capacity. The program provides an opportunity for the organisations to refine their practice and engage with emerging markets and new clients. Many are entering new markets and can see enormous opportunity in engaging in new ways, although some do not.
- The level of skill, innovation and practice varies enormously across the sector. So does the ability of the organisations and trainers to deliver and assess holistically and with imagination in emerging relevant fields of practice. There is scope to assist the sector in this area.
- There is a significant benefit to be gained from lifting ACE RTO exposure to good practice in innovative approaches and delivery. There is sector expertise that can assist with this.
- CCA’s preliminary investigation illustrates that the TSB program is delivering small business skilling outcomes at basic (foundation) and sometimes higher levels, demonstrated by data submitted to the Department and anecdotally by providers.
- Some innovative and novel programs are being delivered, however this effort is not being formally captured.
- Evaluation metrics for the program have not yet been mentioned by the Department. It would be in both the Department’s and the ACE sector’s best interests to provide data on take-up and benefit.
- There is an opportunity for the NSW ACE sector to use this program to shift thinking and reconceptualise how they operate in parts of the market, specifically with small businesses.
- Research and feedback to date indicate that the TSB program provides a good return on investment to the NSW Department of Industry.
- TSB program outcomes would have been enhanced had the NSW Department of Industry provided:
  - additional notice of the program’s commencement;
  - better guidance on program implementation, as providers are not a ‘one size fits all’ and require varying levels of information and support;
  - engagement with CCA to facilitate this process;
  - co-creation opportunities for providers to discuss and leverage ideas prior to and early in the program roll-out;
  - clarification of where the program fits or relates to other ‘non -VET’ small business programs;
  - KPIs or incentives for innovative outputs/outcomes;
  - support for upskilling of staff and delivery models to foster 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, enabling development of approaches that provide leading and cutting-edge skill development; and
  - an idea of the longevity/position of program to allow future planning. A three- year commitment, for example, would allow robust program settings and timeframes for analysis.

The review process has highlighted that the TSB program is delivering good and often exceptional outcomes for the small business target group it was designed to assist. The program has great potential to build and deliver further innovative skilling solutions with the addition of targeted assistance and guidance. CCA recommends the continuation of the TSB program and an evaluation that would assist the roll-out of the program in future years. Information from this paper and the CCA survey could contribute to this evaluation.

## Current Situation

All NSW community colleges that received TSB funding think the program is a good idea, rating the value of the program on a scale from “useful” to “terrific”.

Organisations participating in the TSB have shown different levels of sophistication in identifying, approaching and engaging the small business target audiences. Programs implemented vary by locale, the assessment of ‘small business needs’, the scope of the RTO and the skills and experiences of trainers and coordinators.

## Content Offerings through Tech Savvy for Small Business

The most common TSB offerings are: social media, web tools, digital business basics, bookkeeping accounting programs like Xero and MYOB, payroll, HR and office software applications such as Excel, and some compliance, small business risk topics and leadership areas. Social media is by far the most popular. Specific units of competency offered: BSBITU201, BSBITU202, BSBITU304, BSBITU302, BSBITU303, BSBITU304, BSBITU306, BSB30415, ICT10115, BSB301315, ICTWEB201, CUADID3013, ICTICT208. Foundation skills units are often included.

Social media content is proving enormously popular, and those providers that have not yet refined their content are learning from those which have had success in this area.

## Implementation of Tech Savvy for Small Business

There is a strongly expressed sentiment that the program is valuable and that continuity of funding would be welcomed. The benefits and possibilities for small business are just starting to be explored, and have the potential to yield high benefit and return for recipient businesses, both in the short and long term.

Many TSB providers have found that the program has enabled access to categories of people and parts of their communities they had not engaged with previously.

There are a range of collaborative arrangements in place. Strategies that engage local government or the local business chamber as conduits have been beneficial for some ACE providers. Sharing those experiences has allowed other providers to consider how they might engage or make use of their contacts with councils and other intermediaries.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ connector. Sometimes local expertise is hired to provide specialty courses and programs. Some providers have made their current courses ‘fit’ the program and are using business as usual marketing and promotion mechanisms. The lack of advance notice regarding the TSB program’s commencement, its relatively small size, the uncertainty of ongoing funding and limited staffing levels are all commercial and pragmatic reasons that justify a ‘business as usual’ response to what could be only a one-off program implementation.

Delivery models are varied, ranging from workplace delivery/assessment at one end, to day, evening and weekend blocks over a few weeks, to stand-alone sessions.

There are many views about the program’s design, inclusions and exclusions, e.g. suggestions that the program be formally linked to small business pathways through a specific intermediary; an interest in manuals like the Tech Savvy for Seniors program, or for a more targeted and professional approach in a particular area.

The accredited component of the program involves a degree of red tape and frustration for many small business participants and providers; many providers are vocal in their requests for the program to consist of non-accredited ‘more palatable’ training. Providers are aware that the funding is tied up with VET/accredited training from the NSW Department of industry and that is non-negotiable. Approximately 35% of providers have no issues or concerns about the accredited component and program delivery. All note that the ‘volume of learning’ requirements need to be monitored carefully.

### Timing of Tech Savvy for Small Business Implementation

At the beginning of the program funding period, most providers needed time to design delivery of the program and took the time to find a ‘fit’. As a rough approximation: a quarter of providers started delivery within 8 weeks of contract acceptance, with 65% percent delivering within 6 months (by the end of 2017). Approximately one-third did not start delivery until 2018, with some yet to commence delivery as of early March 2018. Most commonly, several months were required before a viable program shape was determined. Early starters, for example, often offered existing courses until a more suitable product was developed. Needs analysis and collaboration are key components of a successful program. Both take time to do well.

All providers responding to the survey felt they would be able to acquit their TSB contract in a timely way.

CCA survey excerpts follow, providing more direct feedback from TSB RTOs.

### Tech Savvy for Small Business Barriers: A Snapshot

- A lack of planning time as the program was announced/provided with no warning to CCA or the NSW ACE sector.
- Lack of guidance as to program content. This was also a positive as it allowed for innovation and flexibility.
- Some organisations experienced difficulty in accessing the target market because they did not have small business networks in place at the time of program commencement.
- Initial perception in the marketplace that TSB competes with other funded programs – accredited VET, but also those working with similar cohorts outside the VET arena.
- Time taken to build new relationships with organisations working with associated programs: necessary and beneficial but time-consuming.
  - Accessing appropriate trainers in relevant high demand, dynamic industry areas such as digital and social media, has been challenging for some organisations. Most skilled in these areas do not have TAE.
  - Uncertainty as to the longevity of program meant questions as to how much effort to put into developing strategy/programs if TSB is only to go for one year.
  - Timing impacts:
    - A number started quickly, using their existing offerings; others had an idea/structure that enabled rapid turnaround.
    - A significant proportion of providers took time to plan and sought advice from early adopters and from more sophisticated colleges in order to refine approach and offerings.

- Small business clients generally do not care about or want accredited training or units of competency and just desire short, sharp bites of training that is practical and of immediate use.

## Provider Comments on Tech Savvy for Small Program

*“Small businesses very pleased to have technology training. It can be contextualised to suit individual workplaces and works in well with a workplace/F2F combination for training and assessment.”*

*“Understand and welcome the NSW Government commitment to small business, but perhaps more needs to be done to understand the specific needs of this cohort in rural and regional areas (access etc.). I acknowledge the Department’s comments re this ‘bucket of funds’ and how it was allocated to ACE CSO quickly, but the Department needs to understand that it is not a quick nor simple process to design, market and implement a new program with no notice. Perhaps seeking urgent input from members of the CCA/DOI Stakeholder Committee ahead of implementation may have been appropriate (perhaps this will fall under the parameters of the new service agreement between CCA and DOI?)”*

*“Would like greater clarity around what can be included for delivery in the program. I would like the opportunity to continue with the program as I feel as though we are only just starting to realise the benefits it can offer and we have worked hard to let small businesses know of the opportunity.”*

*“No guidance regarding content, difficulty in communicating with target market, no budget for general marketing available within the funding envelope, given the accreditation requirement finding suitable accredited units and trainers.”*

*“Overlap with other programs from other agencies such as ETC, Nortec, Bizconnect program.”*

*“Cost and the inclusion of an accredited outcome is difficult. Small businesses are looking for skills, advice and expertise and have little interest in receiving a certificate for attendance and completing assessment tasks.”*

*“It took us a while to engage with this somewhat new product and market but once we gain momentum with the market and know the products they love, it should become much easier.”*

*“Having this outcome based has been problematic. If it were a program without an accredited UOC, we would have no barriers to setting this up.”*

*“Initially, there was a perception that it was competing against other funded programs in the region, in particular, those offered by BEC, however, the TSB can actually complement those programs and we have established a good working relationship with the BEC and a few other small NGOs.”*

**Prepared by:**

**Community Colleges Australia**

PO Box 1839, QVB Post Office, Sydney NSW 1230

(Street address: Suite 1016, 155 King Street, Sydney NSW 2000)

Tel. (02) 9233 3634; email: [admin@cca.edu.au](mailto:admin@cca.edu.au)

Web [www.cca.edu.au](http://www.cca.edu.au)

28 March 2018