

A New Era

IN CUSTOMS STAFF EDUCATION

A partnership between the Australian Customs Service and the University of Canberra will allow Customs staff to use training courses to gain formal academic qualifications, including bachelor degrees. The project will help Customs to increase its commitment to quality assurance and the courses could be readily adapted for sale to other organisations. KEITH DARROW describes how the unique Customs Commercial Education Program evolved.

Customs has always had training and education courses for its staff. These have been essential in enabling staff to understand their roles and carry out their duties in enforcing the mass of Commonwealth legislation that the organisation is responsible for.

Now, through a new Centre for Customs Studies in the Law Faculty of the University of Canberra, Customs officers will be able to obtain external qualifications through four broad qualification areas ranging from the certificate level through to a degree.

This represents a radical change from what Colin Vassarotti, National Director of Customs newly-created Office of Business Systems, recalls when he joined Customs 38 years ago: “Within a week I was started on the basic training course to teach me the skills I needed to go and work out on the wharves.

“The peak technical training course, in those days, was the Invoice Examining Officer’s Course. It took six months to complete and mainly consisted of highly specialised work associated with the examination of import documents and Customs entries – to make sure that the Customs entries accurately reflected what was shown in the commercial documents we examined. It was central to what Customs was about – making sure that the details of cargo being entered and cleared were accurate. It impacted primarily on revenue collection, but it also had a lot of importance for many other areas of Customs.

“This was not simply a course that you did. It was pass or fail. If you didn’t pass, you couldn’t move on in the organisation. People used to fight very hard to be selected and once you were through the future started opening up to you. It was the pathway into the higher areas of Customs technical work.

Colin said the original course had undergone a great deal of change.

“Today’s Customs training is completely different to the course I described,” he said. “The old content has also become less relevant, given that a lot of the work that we were being trained to do is now being performed within our automated systems. But the strongest characteristic of that course was that you simply had to get the qualification to progress your career. Importantly also the training really equipped you well for the fundamentals of Customs commercial work.”

He said most training since has been in-house. “Even though we’ve set our own pass or fail standards, we’ve never had any external accreditation of those courses. That is a shame because the courses were, and many still are, very intensive and a lot of skill and effort is required to get through them.

“Ironically, a lot of the people who have come through that training and gained those Customs skills have subsequently become lecturers in tertiary accredited courses run by other institutions that train customs brokers.

“But the fact is that today we’ve moved into a completely different era where far greater professionalism is expected of Customs officers. The kind of work previously done by the old invoice-examining officer is now undertaken by professional auditors.

Sophisticated needs, systems

Colin said Customs was moving into auditing sophisticated management systems and data systems of importers and exporters, and needed the recognised skills to deal with those challenges. “This gap between our technical qualifications and even our confidence and skill as auditors, was picked up by a number of our critics and reflected in the Conroy Report which was the precursor to major changes in Customs. It was something we had to address fairly swiftly, and now we have the means to overcome the problem.”

David Widdowson, former Customs National Manager, Commercial Compliance, was a member of the Industry Panel on Customs Audit Reforms, which the former Government created to examine audit operations and policies in Customs.

The panel’s report, commenting on the breadth and depth of knowledge required to administer Customs responsibilities, said:

“The Panel notes that some areas of industry do not regard Customs staff as qualified auditors. This perception may not take into account the nature of current Customs audit activities or reflect an understanding of the current Customs compliance environment. Nevertheless, it is a perception which needs to be addressed. The Panel believes that the best way of addressing this issue is by setting minimum standards which an officer must achieve before being authorised to undertake a Customs audit at a company’s premises. However, this perception can only be changed over time as new and very different types of compliance improvement activities occur.”

“The Panel believes that any team undertaking an industry audit must include an ‘accredited’ Customs auditor. To be accredited as a Customs auditor, an officer should be required to demonstrate an appropriate knowledge of the relevant industry which is being audited. In addition, the officer should have a demonstrated knowledge of relevant legislation and either relevant tertiary qualifications or a demonstrated ability to apply workplace competencies to predetermined levels and standards.”

David agreed with Colin’s comments about the need for greater professionalism in Customs, adding that the nature of the job had changed dramatically in the past few years: “In the past we would say to an officer, ‘Here’s a bundle of Customs entries, go out to the company – it could be a company as big as BHP – and verify the details on those entries’. Now we’re saying to our staff, ‘Go to the company and assess the level of integrity of their systems and procedures.’

“The two approaches are miles apart. One is a simple compliance checking exercise. The other is a very comprehensive systems-based audit. They are fundamentally different.

David made the analogy that Customs had a lot of people who were talented carpenters. They were trained to be talented carpenters. Now there was a need for them to become architects, because what they had previously been doing was no longer relevant in the modern environment.

“So we had some choices to make,” he said. “We could have retrained our carpenters, retired them and hired architects, or we could have a mixture of both. We decided to have a mixture of both. We have staff who are highly skilled in customs technical issues and their industry knowledge is also very high. But in general terms, remembering that we have some highly qualified accountants and trained auditors on our staff, their audit knowledge needs to be improved. But right now the heavy emphasis is on retraining staff who need

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The Commercial Education Program

The new Commercial Education Program is being jointly developed and delivered by Customs and the University of Canberra.

The program will be available to Customs staff throughout Australia in face-to-face and distance education forms. It will ensure that the technical skills and knowledge needed by officers will be imparted in the most effective way. It will enable officers to work towards externally recognised tertiary qualifications.

The program is structured into four broad qualification areas: certificate level IV, diploma, advanced

diploma and ultimately a degree. It consists of a vast range of subject specific, discrete units of training designed to address the skill and knowledge needs of staff working in commercial and business spheres.

Subjects will cover areas such as accounting, legal principles, compliance audit techniques, systems analysis, business statistics and many more.

Delivery of the first units has started and work on the development of another 60 or more units is under way.

to be brought up to speed on accounting and audit issues - to provide them with the skill base that they need - and that level of competence will be recognised through the endorsement of a tertiary institution.

“The CEP will give staff a tertiary accredited outcome, in terms of their qualifications. And when this is established we will give a commitment that nobody will lead an audit, or manage an audit, unless they are accredited to the appropriate level. Nobody will take part in an audit unsupervised unless they’ve reached the authorised level. Obviously, as of today, we can’t promise that. But the aim is that as soon as we’ve got through the CEP process, we can give that assurance.

Training for today’s needs

Colin Vassarotti said: “The beautiful thing about the CEP is that these courses are available to anyone in Customs and officers can take their education to any level they want. It’s more up-market, certainly, than the training previously available. But, in terms of difficulty, it’s no different. The orientation and content is different because it’s geared to today’s needs. But the demands on officers are not going to be all that much different than they were. As always, the harder they work, the better the result will be.

“But now the training required of officers is being done hand in glove with the University of Canberra and it carries with it that extra recognition. And if staff members undertake and complete successfully the right number of units, they can build up their external qualifications through the certificate level to diploma to advanced diploma and ultimately to a degree.

“Those who are in Customs and already have an extensive working background here can improve their own knowledge and performance by taking this on. They’ll have the satisfaction of coming through, potentially, with a degree in subject matter with which they are very familiar with anyway. For the longer-serving ones it will be associated with their life’s work. For the newer staff it makes it so much easier for them to gain the right skills to help them do their job and also advance their careers.

“We are now recruiting a much higher proportion of people with various tertiary qualifications. These staff can readily adapt to this program and pick up whatever elements they need to integrate with the tertiary skills they already have. So again Customs will benefit through the development of an increasingly effective work force.

“Although the CEP initially grew out of commercial compliance, it is only the beginning of the program for Customs as a whole. There is a vision, endorsed by the Executive Group, which sees the program ultimately being extended to all Customs staff and even to interested external organisations.

“The intention is for equivalent modules to be developed for all the various disciplines we have in this organisation, and this is an exciting prospect for Customs.”

John Knott, the University of Canberra’s Project Director (CEP), says the program provided an opportunity to develop a mutually close working relationship with links at a number of functional and operational levels.

“This relationship has been based on a partnering approach that was developed recently during a special workshop involving key stakeholders from both organisations.

“Customs Chief Executive Officer, Lionel Woodward, and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Canberra, Professor Don Aitkin, attended the workshop and signed a charter that describes the way in which the two institutions will work together. One of the outcomes led to the establishment of the Centre for Customs Studies, situated within the School of Law at the University. It is the focal point of activity for university staff and Customs officers involved in developing units for the CEP.”

John said the centre has three staff, and their focus was on preparation of the units that comprise the very extensive CEP curriculum. In time the focus will shift to the delivery of the course and beyond that to the conduct of various joint research activities.

“The centre will undertake fee-for-service activities and offer training and education to organisations in the trade and transport industries, to other government agencies and to Customs services overseas,” Mr Knott said.

“This will help to offset the cost of establishing the CEP, but more importantly, it ensures that the program is outwardly focused and relevant in the broader business context.”

Keith Darrow is a former Customs Public Affairs Officer who is now a freelance writer.

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