

Collaborating with employers to improve employability skills

Multiple benefits are likely to emerge when a training provider develops a strong relationship with an industry, particularly when a new development occurs in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, such as the inclusion of employability skills in Training Packages.

Case study

A long-term relationship between one training provider, TAFESA, and the electronics industry has focused on employability skills for some time, and has produced substantial benefits for all stakeholders.

LINKup Employability Skills is a specially designed developmental strategy for employability skills suitable for all training contexts and workplaces says its developer, Rob Denton, Advanced Skills Lecturer, Electronics and Computer Systems Engineering program, TAFE SA. Denton calls LINKup a “comprehensive value-added' developmental strategy”.

The origins of LINKup date back to 1991 when action research was conducted at the then Tea Tree Gully TAFE in Adelaide, strongly influenced by the acclaimed model of generic skills development from the Alverno College, USA.

Denton says that LINKup was founded on the educational principles of the Alverno model, with an emphasis on practical implementation. LinkUp was also developed through stakeholder involvement and trials in VET, university, workplace and school contexts.

Denton explains that LINKup pioneered the Validated Self Assessment (VSA) process,

... as a learner-centred system designed to ensure students develop a sound knowledge of and competence in the employability skills performed in authentic activities, integral with technical competencies.

All self assessments are validated by an appropriate assessor – lecturer or workplace supervisor – ensuring credibility, says Denton.

VSA tools, both print and enhanced online interactive formats, are specifically designed to provide a systematic developmental learning experience for students rather than merely an assessment checklist.



The comprehensive LINKup website provides total support including student induction, professional development, self assessment tools, educational philosophies, research papers, interactive multimedia resources and more, as set out on <http://linkup.tafesa.edu.au>

The LINKup developmental process is characterised, says Denton, as “learner-centred, systematic, authentic, universal, transferable, efficient, effective, practical and proven”.

It assists students to generate individualised employability skills profiles and equips them to convincingly discuss these skills, backed up with comprehensive evidence, at job interviews. But above all, it helps people strengthen these vital skills.

LINKup is used extensively by the TAFE SA Electronics program at Tea Tree Gully campus with over 1700 validated self assessments recorded in this small program over the past few years. A recent example is provided below.

Employability skills for interns

In South Australia in 2007, the Electronics Industry Association (EIA) successfully launched a new internship program for university graduates, providing opportunities for graduates to gain valuable experience in four successful and diverse electronics companies over a period of two years. The internships are monitored and managed by the Engineering Employers Association, SA Group Training Scheme (EEAGTS).

The EIA recognised the importance of employability skills and invited the TAFE SA Electronics program to use their *LINKup Employability Skills* assessment and development strategy to evaluate and strengthen these skills in all interns through their workplace experiences.

The interns were inducted into the LINKup ‘Validated Self Assessment’ (VSA) process requiring them to critically reflect on their employability skills demonstrated in real work activities and identify evidence to support their self assessments. This evidence was then ‘validated’ by suitable workplace supervisors who were also given a brief induction into this process. During each of their four placements, interns were required to complete VSAs for selected employability skills deemed most vital to this industry.

Feedback from the interns and supervisors confirms the success of this initiative in helping interns understand these skills and improve their performance in the workplace. Greg Bassani, Executive Director, EIA, sent these complimentary, written remarks about the program to Rob Denton, which are reproduced with Greg’s permission:

I can see LINKup getting some further traction within our industry as a consequence of your involvement with the internship program, and this is a great thing.

Being able to influence the development of the skill set of such a capable group of young engineers is an excellent seed to be planting for the future of our industry. Imagine these guys in ten years time as senior engineers, or further out as CEOs... What do you think will be the values that they will emphasise most for their new employees? My guess is that it will be communication, problem solving, teamwork and initiative and enterprise!

Developing strategies

LINKup is one way to engage with industries to improve employability skills. The LINKup model, says Denton, is “a generic assessment and development strategy that can be applied to any discipline and any context”, not just electronics, so it may contain good practice approaches which VET practitioners could adapt for other contexts.

The model for assessing and reporting employability skills, developed by a project undertaken by the National Quality Council from 2006-2008, advocates that providers select from a range of collaborative strategies between providers and industry to promote customisation of the model in specific industry settings.

The model for assessing and reporting employability skills is set out as handout No.11 of the resource: 'Level 1 workshop for implementing the model for assessing and reporting employability skills', which is available at www.employabilityskillsresources.com

Some suggested ways for providers to relate with industry for level two professional development, which focuses on industry engagement, are described in the document 'Strategies to promote industry engagement with Level 2 professional development involving employability skills' and available at www.employabilityskillsresources.com

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