

# Designing state-wide professional development for employability skills

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The model for assessing and reporting employability skills which was developed by a project undertaken by the National Quality Council from 2006-2008, includes a professional development strategy. The strategy advocates that VET personnel work through a process of finding appropriate information and then developing knowledge and skills at progressively deeper levels. This process can be undertaken by staff from just the one training provider or by a wider group.

## **Collaborative PD**

One way to generate and share knowledge about how to best implement Training Packages which now include employability skills is for people from different training providers and other VET organisations to work together in professional development programs.

Bringing together a sample of people from across Queensland to jointly examine the issue of employability skills was an initiative taken by the Queensland Department of Education Training and the Arts (DETA), and coordinated by Judy Gronold (pictured). Gronold is Senior Program Manager, Information Technology and Product Services, Industry and VET Policy, DETA and was assisted by Reframing the Future project funding for the purpose.



The driver of the project was clear, said Gronold:

The inclusion of an employability skills assessment and recording project in the NQC Priorities and Work Plan identified this agenda as a key national issue and provided a driver for this Reframing the Future project.

Working with facilitator, Cathie Kerle, (Senior Program Officer, Product Services), her first task was to interest the right people to join the team and scope the project:

We used a range of personal and professional networks to identify and promote the project to appropriate participants.

The eventual project team included representatives from the following: Australian Council of Private Education and Training (ACPET) (2 people); Vocational Education and Training Industry Group (VETIG) (1); TAFE Queensland (5); private training providers (3);

Department of Training, Education and the Arts, Product Services (2); Department of Training, Education and the Arts, Professional Practices (2).

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The diversity of representatives was both a challenge and an opportunity since they brought with them a broad range of understanding of the employability skills context and a number of, at times, competing agendas.

Another challenge was scoping the project:

The initial scoping of the project was our first real issue – the project had a Queensland VET-wide focus and the volume of research available around generic /transferable /employability skills was large.

Gronold found it difficult initially to identify what the project team wanted to achieve and then source the research that would best achieve the outcomes. The group resolved the issues as follows:

We used a range of strategies during the first workshop and were able to establish a key question which provided a framework for activity *What are the key things that RTOs need to know about employability skills?* Once we had this sorted we were able to identify that what the project really wanted to do was to help: to “prepare RTO-land to make the Employability Skills agenda work”.

To achieve this goal of helping RTOs, the group decided to address the following key questions:

- What is the employability skills agenda and where has it come from?
- What is required for planning, delivery, assessment and reporting?
- What skills does the VET workforce need to assist students to progress their employability skills?
- What professional development is required?

These questions then “established a framework for all subsequent activity by the group”.

To assist the group’s learning outside of the three scheduled workshops, a number of innovative methods were used:

We organised three key workshops and added online bookmarking, ([del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us) [www.del.icio.us.com](http://www.del.icio.us.com)) *wiki* information sharing ([www.esforqldvet.wikispaces.com](http://www.esforqldvet.wikispaces.com)) telephone and email contact between meetings. We had expected a fairly linear progression of research activity however that didn’t occur. Once the appetite for information was stimulated we realised that the access to and sharing of information is a fairly chaotic affair.

As part of the participatory action learning activity, the group used a range of strategies to create and transform knowledge. These included:

- sharing past generic skills implementation stories
- brainstorming options
- scoping activity in the context of a range of RTO operations
- introducing and practising online collaboration and book-marking activities

- scenario planning – *Where would we like to be re ES this time next year?*
- reflecting on key messages from previous and current meetings
- developing a framework for interrogating the research and reporting on it
- a professional conversation with employability skills practitioners and “experts”
- working through the DETA Logic Program Evaluation Model
- developing action plans
- sharing activities with colleagues between meetings
- establishing key questions and individual debate
- working through specific questions across a number key research resources
- using a range of sharing strategies including group discussion, individual presentation, developing key questions, story telling and ‘What if?’ contingency management scenarios
- providing a summary of the outcomes of each meeting on the Wiki. Team members were encouraged to add/modify this material and to share with colleagues between meetings.

Gronold found that, although team members were very interested in the potential of the online bookmarking and collaboration tools, what “really stimulated their excitement for the project was the second workshop where we engaged in professional conversation with some of the ‘giants’ of the employability skills arena in Australia”. She explains why:

Team members had by this stage interrogated a range of explicit written research and were now able to test ideas, clarify perceptions and share stories with the ‘experts’. In this way they could access and build tacit knowledge and consequently become much more confident in their project roles.

At the third and final workshop the group concentrated on three key activities:

- documenting the framework for the interrogation of research on employability skills
- developing a summary of research against this framework
- undertaking an extensive evaluation and action planning activity using the DETA Logic Program Evaluation Model.

At this final workshop, participants agreed to validate the research summary and to share the outcomes of the project with their colleagues in the VET sector according to the activities identified in their action plan.

### **Key documents examined**

Participants engaged in a broad range of research including examining the following key documents, said Gronold:

- *The Employment Edge @ UB TAFE – Employability Skills Resource Kit for TAFE Teachers* ©University of Ballarat 2006
- *Employability Skills – From Framework to Practice – An introductory Guide for Trainers and Assessors* © Commonwealth of Australia 2006

- National Quality Council Employability Skills draft project materials 2007 ( draft John Mitchell & Associates)
- *Employability Skills and the TAA04 Training and Assessment Package* ©DEST 2007
- *Assessment and Reporting of employability skills in Training Packages – The Allen Consulting Group* © DEST 2006
- NCVER – “At a Glance” brochures around generic skills
- Training Packages @ Work publications
- The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and Business Council of Australia (BCA) 2002 report *Employability Skills for the Future*.

### **PD strategy**

The approach taken by the Queensland group has many elements, including the identification of a shared goal, the dissemination of information, the collaborative sharing of ideas, the use of multiple communication strategies and the testing and development of new knowledge.

This developmental approach fits well with the suggestions for professional development provided in the model for assessing and reporting employability skills. The model 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](http://www.employabilityskillsresources.com)

The appendix to the above resource sets out a professional development strategy for implementing the model. Training providers are encouraged to modify that generic professional development strategy for their local context, as modelled by the Queensland group.

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