
Implementation: LINKUP, A corporate focus on the key competencies at Torrens Valley TAFE

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This ‘story from the field’ describes the experiences of working with the Mayer key competencies or the new Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry/Business Council of Australia employability skills and attributes. It is one of a series published on the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/generic.htm>>. These stories are designed to help advise and foster better teaching practice.

Background and context

From ‘enterprise skills’ to ‘key competencies’

“This is a must!” was the response of Michael Sachsse, Director of Tea Tree Gully College of TAFE (now Torrens Valley TAFE), following his 1990 visit to Alverno College in the United States of America. Alverno was then, and remains today, the most highly acclaimed international exemplar of generic skills implementation. Significantly, today, Torrens Valley TAFE has a strong connection with Alverno including a *memorandum of understanding* established this year formalising our close collaboration and sharing of educational practices.

This Alverno inspiration was evident in the college’s 1990 charter aimed at trialling and developing innovative methodologies in vocational education and training (VET). A very strong culture of collaboration and action research developed amongst the people of this college to explore initiatives including open learning (now flexible learning), competency-based training, new learning technologies, learner-centred methodologies and enterprise skills. The college charter was outlined in the *Tea Tree Gully College of TAFE 1990 Annual Report* saying

The charter requires the College to produce graduates who ... have acquired a range of *enterprise skills* which will enable them to operate in an enterprising culture. In summary, exiting students will be able to: think laterally, identify and solve problems, take initiative and be self-directive, communicate effectively in verbal and written forms, work by themselves and be able to work as part of a team, adapt to change, make decisions and accept responsibility for those decisions, access and use information.

The formation of an organisation-wide Enterprise Skills Focus Group was among the strategies initiated to nurture local research and trialling of this initiative. This early focus on generic skills pre-empted the national Mayer Committee introduction of key competencies. The uncanny similarity of these two initiatives served to validate the pioneering work on enterprise skills at Tea Tree Gully College of TAFE. The focus group was subsequently renamed the Key Competencies Focus Group and its draft report in 1993 stated: ‘The result of the focus group’s work was a student record and log book which was trialled in several faculties during 1992. An “enterprise skills statement” was also developed for graduating students’. A document titled ‘Enterprise Skills Development Program—Faculty guidelines’ was printed in May 1993 providing staff with a framework for implementation including definitions, guiding principles,

responsibilities, key elements, performance levels, assessment and reporting. Notably, these foundational principles of implementation remain clearly evident in today's much more refined and improved implementation principles.

Progress towards practical implementation of key competencies then slowed for a number of years amid implementation of other training reform priorities but it was certainly not forgotten. In 1996 we experienced a great revival in key competencies across the nation thanks to a raised national profile and availability of professional development funding. Torrens Valley TAFE made the most of this opportunity undertaking a major 'Teaching and learning the key competencies in VET' action learning project and collaborating in statewide and national networking activities. This was the springboard that first launched the Electronics & Information Technology Program into the national arena as a significant player in key competencies implementation. The uniqueness of this program with its extreme focus on flexible learning and key competencies positioned it as a lead agent in implementation and development of key competencies assessment principles and practices for Torrens Valley TAFE. Today there are visible signs of varying degrees of practical implementation within different programs across the institute and all programs are required to incorporate key competencies into their strategic planning to stimulate ongoing development. (See other stories in this series from various Torrens Valley TAFE programs).

What did we want to do?

We have always sought to build on the institute's historical interest in this area by making a serious commitment to practical organisation-wide implementation of key competencies assessment. The institute is committed to supporting this initiative to meet the current high priority needs of students, industry, community and the national training agenda in this area. It is seen as educational practice that will add great value to training. The goal endorsed by the Torrens Valley TAFE Key Competencies Assessment Focus Group is:

to make Key Competencies 'Know-How' a distinguishing feature and strength of all TVTAFE graduates!" Incorporating ...

- ✦ Formal TVTAFE recognition of Key Competencies for ALL students
- ✦ 'Key Competencies Know-How'—a special emphasis on ensuring ALL students know & understand their Key Competencies and can convincingly talk about them and continue to improve them.
- ✦ An institute-wide implementation framework to provide assessment and reporting guidelines, quality assurance, professional development and general support.
- ✦ Customised assessment strategies to suit the specific needs of each program.

How did we try to do it?

The institute is essentially maintaining and building upon its historical approach to this initiative rather than initiating any sort of radical new implementation strategy. The key components of this approach include:

1 Organisational vision and strategic commitment

Our current strategic commitment for 2003–2005 is to:

Ensure graduates of Torrens Valley TAFE have the employability skills sought by industry and are work ready, innovative and capable.

As stated earlier, this strategic priority is required to be addressed in all program annual plans.

2 *Valuing flexible learning and key competencies as core elements—not as simply ‘add-ons’*

Flexible learning and key competencies are interwoven into our strategic priorities and form the core of our educational vision.

3 *Explicit self-assessment*

We believe that *self-assessment* is the most effective strategy for learning and development of generic skills. Assessment is used as a means of *forcing* the processes and practices of key competencies to become *explicit* in order that they may be learned and developed and that empowering students in this process develops their key competencies *know-how*.

This fundamental principle is also employed by Alverno College in their international best practice work with generic skills and very aptly titled ‘assessment-as-learning’.

4 *Stakeholder consultation, collaboration and feedback*

Close consultation and collaboration with students, employers, institute management and staff is critical and includes academic forums, surveys and interviews, research projects, industry guest speakers, Student Representative Council participation and partnerships with employers.

5 *Organisation-wide support for practical implementation*

Organisational support is crucial and includes:

- ✦ key competencies coordinator
- ✦ Torrens Valley TAFE Key Competencies Focus Group
- ✦ framework of fundamental principles and philosophies
- ✦ development of assessment tools and processes
- ✦ intra and internet sites (under development)
- ✦ promotional events
- ✦ keeping abreast of (and influencing) national developments

Perhaps the most visible support mechanism is the Torrens Valley TAFE Key Competencies Focus Group under the leadership of the institute key competencies coordinator.

The purpose of this group includes ...

- ✦ **Practical implementation** of Key Competencies Assessment as part of the TVTAFE ‘Innovation in Learning’ Strategic Priority.
- ✦ To **collaborate, share** and **support** one another in Key Competencies Assessment implementation.
- ✦ To act as an advisory group for the TVTAFE Innovation in Learning committee to **provide advice, make recommendations** and **seek appropriate institute support**.



The focus group has developed a new ‘brand’ or ‘icon’ for the Torrens Valley TAFE key competencies initiative based on the concept that empowering students through self-

assessment of their key competencies assists them to systematically identify and LINKUP a generic skills framework that will equip them to perform effectively in all aspects of life. In fact,

the notion of 'linking up' has numerous significant connotations for generic skills and was a popular choice as our corporate brand.

What did we achieve?

We have established a climate for inspiring staff to discover and begin to seriously explore key competencies assessment and a support framework to nurture and share the action research across the institute. Programs are taking a strategic approach to implementation as evidenced in other stories in this series from selected Torrens Valley TAFE programs.

What still needs to be done?

Much more! Whilst as an institute we have taken some significant steps forward and gathered some momentum we cannot afford to change our focus now. It is particularly important that the leading innovators in the institute are allowed to showcase their achievements and engage in a cycle of continuous improvement to continue to generate positive energy and continue to draw more and more people into the flow. That is our challenge!

Hints for success

You must have a vision!

From a personal perspective I can honestly say that Torrens Valley TAFE achievements in implementation of key competencies assessment are directly attributable to strong educational vision backed by strategic commitment and support. Empowering key 'innovators' to pursue the cutting edge (or even the bleeding edge) of innovation, is also an important catalyst for widespread change in pursuit of the vision.

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