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## Implementation: Taking up the challenge

SANDRA NEVILLE  
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.

### Context

The Business Services Training Package and the Public Service Training Package were delivered for the first time by Torrens Valley TAFE at the beginning of 2002. These packages are designed so that the key competencies can be assessed along with the unit competencies, but little direction was available to enable this to happen. In fact most of the issues that were discussed in Catherine Down's (2000) paper 'Key competencies in training packages' are still unresolved.

Lecturers involved in the delivery of units of competency believe that the key competencies are embedded in the activities and assessment that they facilitate. All agreed that very little is happening in terms of students being able to articulate their skills in this area and hence *know* that they are developing generic skills.

Based on this premise an application was submitted for 'Reframing the Future' funding. The project is examining the latest research findings in the area of key competencies and assessment, and will then develop a methodology for the Business Services Faculty at Torrens Valley TAFE. Our focus is Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels 5 and 6.

The project aligns with two key areas identified as strategic priorities for our organisation. The first is 'innovation in learning'—ensuring graduates of Torrens Valley TAFE have the employability skills sought by industry and are work-ready and capable. The second is 'our people'—bring out the best in staff creativity and build the capacity to be innovative and embrace change.

### How did we do it?

Having successfully gained funding, an interested and interesting range of staff from Business Services formed the nucleus of the project group. Representation is diverse, with participants specialising in finance, management, business administration, workplace training and marketing. Our team is complemented by a participant from outside the organisation with whom we have a collaborative training relationship, and also by the Torrens Valley Library Services Manager.

Workshops are the principal methodology for the work of the group, with the program initially focusing on exploring current research, both via websites and by utilising experts in the area. David Curtis from the Centre for Lifelong Learning and Hugh Guthrie from the National Centre

for Vocational Education Research were two of the subject experts who have had invaluable input into our research.

Rob Denton, Principal Lecturer in Electronics at Torrens Valley TAFE, has worked over the last few years at developing a methodology for the assessment of key competencies in his faculty, and while the proposed Business Services methodology differs from this, Rob's support and input has been highly valued by the group. Rob's conviction that self-assessment is the cornerstone for a successful methodology has certainly been supported by our research and is the key to the methodology we have developed.

Our methodology is founded on the following principles:

- ✦ The assessment process must be as simple as possible for both students and facilitators.
- ✦ Self-assessment is the key to students understanding what key competencies they have developed.
- ✦ Students must self-assess (twice) against every level of key competency listed for every unit of competency they undertake.
- ✦ Non-achievement of the key competencies at the levels stated in each unit of competency will mean non-achievement of the competency.
- ✦ The recognition of prior learning process will apply to key competencies just as it does to unit competencies; that is, students may gather evidence from previous study, the workplace or the community.

## What are we trying to achieve?

The over-riding proviso for success of the implementation of our methodology is communication with both students and staff. Students need to be informed at every opportunity about the key competencies and what their attainment will mean for them. Our information sessions for prospective students will give general information about key competencies and a booklet is being prepared at the moment, giving more specific information about the process. Induction is recognised as being crucial for all students.

There has been a recognition by the group that the 'selling' or 'marketing' of the process to students will have to vary for different Australian Qualification Framework levels. Although the project focused on AQF levels 5 and 6, the process will eventually be rolled out across the entire Business Services program. What is meaningful to students studying at AQF levels 2–4 (and therefore likely to be studying to *get* a job) is very different to those at levels 5 and 6 who are more often than not already in the workforce.

## What still needs to be done?

Staff will need to be 'trained' in supporting students through the self-assessment process. It is crucial that staff also examine their delivery, both in terms of content and methodology, to ensure that students are provided with appropriate activities in order that they may develop their generic skills.

Two pilot groups will be identified—one classroom-based group and one industry based—to trial the self-assessment methodology in term one 2004. No doubt, based on feedback and evaluation of the process, adjustments will be made, but it is anticipated that the process will be rolled out across the whole Business Services faculty by term three 2004. The process will easily embrace the implementation of the Employability Skills Framework.

## Hints for success

Our project has been successful in achieving outcomes for a number of reasons. First, the timing was 'right' in terms of the availability of credible research—in fact, the amount of information and research about key competencies was almost overwhelming. Second, the group has remained focused, and I believe this has come about by setting achievable goals for all workshops. The participants are all committed to achieving a common methodology, and have been prepared to work hard towards this outcome. Third, the mix of research and 'hands on' appealed to all styles of learning and working.

Even though the project has official ended, the group will continue to meet to achieve its objective of assessing generic skills throughout the whole of the Business Services faculty by mid-way through 2004.

## Where can I find out more?

Down, C 2000, *Key competencies in training packages*, AVETRA conference, Adelaide, viewed September 15 2003, <<http://www.avetra.org.au/papers%202000/down1.PDF>>.

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### *Contact details:*

Sandra Neville, Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE, 100 Smart Road Modbury SA 5092

Phone (08) 8207 2745

Fax (08) 8207 2744

Email: <[Sandra.Neville@tv.tafe.sa.edu.au](mailto:Sandra.Neville@tv.tafe.sa.edu.au)>

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