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## Employability skills: A work in progress at the University of Ballarat

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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 University of Ballarat is a regional dual sector university with five technical and further education (TAFE) campuses situated across western Victoria. The ministerial statement *Knowledge and skills for the innovation economy* (June 2002) prompted organisational interest in the delivery and assessment of key competencies (later referred to as employability skills). This increased awareness of the critical importance of these generic skills has led to several initiatives being undertaken since September 2002.

### What did we want to do?

The overall aims of the University of Ballarat initiatives can be summarised as:

- ✦ investigating current approaches to the delivery and assessment of generic skills
- ✦ defining employability skills in a meaningful way for University of Ballarat students
- ✦ articulating to all TAFE staff the importance of embedding these skills into course delivery and assessment practices
- ✦ identifying internal and external exemplars where employability skills are being delivered and assessed effectively
- ✦ providing ongoing professional development for TAFE teaching staff on the inclusion of these skills into both training package and curriculum delivery
- ✦ investigating ways of monitoring the effectiveness of course delivery and assessment of these skills.

### How did we try to do it?

For two consecutive years the University of Ballarat conducted TAFE staff development days around the general themes of key competencies/employability skills.

'Creatively cultivating capability for the 21<sup>st</sup> century' was the title for the 2002 University of Ballarat TAFE staff development day designed as the introductory initiative to raise staff

awareness of the critical nature of the key competencies for our students. Three snapshots of programs demonstrating effective integration of the Mayer key competencies in delivery and assessment were profiled on the day: a Community Jobs Program, elements of the Certificate in General Education for Adults, and core units from the Metals and Engineering Training Package. Stella Axarlis AM, a member of the Australian National Training Authority's Board, inspired staff with a challenging keynote address: *Creating change for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Staff then spent the afternoon in group discussion sessions reflecting on their own teaching and assessment practice around the key competencies.

Nine months down the track in 2003, a second University of Ballarat TAFE staff development day: 'Rejuvenating TAFE: Future directions for VET in Victoria' continued to build on the theme of generic competencies. Although the terminology changed from 'key competencies' to 'Employability Skills', the importance of these generic skills was reinforced. We heard from both key industry people as well as the Victorian Qualifications Authority about where the responsibility resides for developing these skills in our students.

Staff development days, at their best, can inform and inspire us. However, senior managers believed that more needed to be done about ensuring that every program area in the TAFE Division takes responsibility for incorporating employability skills into delivery and assessment. In consultation with the Learning and Teaching Support Unit, the Head of TAFE Programs put forward a submission for funding a major staff development initiative which is now known as The Employability Skills Project. The project, which will operate over a 12-month period, aims to follow on from the awareness-raising activity of the staff development days and to use a work-based, action learning framework to ensure the delivery and assessment of generic skills in all TAFE program areas. Mentors from each of the three TAFE teaching schools will be selected (based on a set of criteria) to form an Employability Skills Implementation Group. For the remainder of 2003, the mentors will develop action learning projects in consultation with staff from each of their schools. Learning 'how to' mentor will also form part of the project.

The mentors will work with the Learning and Teaching Support Unit to share effective practice, to develop capability within the schools in the delivery and assessment of employability skills, and to monitor the effectiveness of the action learning projects in 2004.

## What did we achieve?

Our achievements are still 'a work in progress' as the title of this story implies. Next year at this time we will have more substantial progress to report. We hope to draw on our organisational experience in work-based action learning, as many staff members now have considerable experience in these types of staff development projects.

## What still needs to be done?

Our major Employability Skills Staff Development Project is still in its infancy. We are currently selecting our mentors and identifying their job roles. We are negotiating budgets with heads of schools and beginning to construct our inaugural meeting for the implementation group towards the end of 2003. We have taken a few tentative steps but still have many kilometres to travel.

## Hints for success

We welcome any 'hints' for success from people who may have already travelled further down this road.

## Where do I find more?

*Knowledge and skills for the innovation economy* (June 2002), viewed 8/10/03  
<<http://www.otte.vic.gov.au/publications/KnowledgeandSkills/index.htm>>.

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