

# Summary of the National Stakeholder Forum to Progress the Employability Skills Framework

## Background

On 29<sup>th</sup> June 2004, a National Forum was convened in Melbourne as part of the project to develop a strategy to support the universal recognition and recording of employability skills. Over 70 participants attended the forum representing industry, schools, the VET sector, higher education institutions, employment and careers agencies, community groups and government. Prior to the forum, research and consultation was conducted and various documents were released for public comment.

The project is using the definition of employability skills from the report *Employability Skills for the Future*. Employability skills are defined as:<sup>1</sup>

... skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions.

This definition needs to be considered in the context that employability skills are developed over a life-time in all aspects of life experience including (but not limited to) paid employment and formal education. The project also uses the eight skills groupings of employability skills as set out in the report *Employability Skills for the Future*.

## The sections below document the main conclusions and themes that emerged from the forum. Overview of main conclusions

In summary, the general consensus reached at the forum was that it is important to develop a practical strategy to support the universal valuing of employability skills, and a portfolio approach to recording them.

On the basis of the forum discussions, the strategy should include:

- the use of a common language, based on the definition of employability skills in the *Employability Skills Framework*, including the eight skills groupings identified;
- the provision of support for individual portfolio owners, including mentoring, portfolio templates, and advice on evidence required and self-assessment; and
- the promotion of employability skills to all stakeholders.

It was further recognised that there was a need for a mechanism to 'house' the portfolios and some suggested the myfuture site would be an appropriate site. Such a mechanism could also be used to promote best practice in other areas, such as methods of skills development, verification and assessment. However, it was recognised that the details of these two elements would take longer to resolve or to reach a satisfactory level of agreement on among stakeholders. Further work would be necessary over the medium term.

## Themes

In the course of the forum the following themes emerged from the groups' discussions.

### *Universal valuing*

The 'universal' aspect of the strategy concerns universal valuing of an agreed approach to promote understanding and use of the concept of employability skills. The suggested approach is to use a portfolio that includes providing supports and guidance to individual portfolio owners and employers.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & the Business Council of Australia March 2002, *Employability Skills for the Future*, DEST, Canberra p.3.

### *Focus on outcomes*

The portfolio is a tool to achieve outcomes, it is not an outcome itself. The outcomes that the portfolio tool would assist to achieve are two-fold:

- Employment – getting a job, keeping a job and getting a better job; and
- Self-development – understanding your employability skills, understanding the need for continued development of your employability skills over a working life-time.

### *Stakeholder roles*

The needs and roles of individuals and employers were the subject of most discussion, while the roles of education institutions, and governments discussed to a lesser degree.<sup>2</sup>

There was consensus that individuals are the portfolios owners. They are responsible for and control the information in a portfolio, how information is presented and who it is presented to.

Employers value employability skills when they are used in actual employment. Tangible employer support of the Employability Skills Framework is critical to its successful implementation and uptake. It must be clear to portfolio owners that employers understand and value explicit presentation and discussion of employability skills. This will be evident when employers refer to employability skills in job advertisements, in interviews and in on-going staff development.

There was discussion around the current use of due diligence by employers to check information presented by a prospective employee. This would remain the case for information presented from a portfolio after recruitment.

### *The need for common language*

Common language will assist to promote understanding of the employability skills portfolio in the community, which should in turn encourage the use of the approach. The common language must encompass the eight skills groupings in the framework, but could also extend to a common understanding around the various exemplars of employability skills.

### *Lifelong learning*

The portfolio must cater for lifelong learning. People move in and out of the education system and the workforce. As people become older the formal qualifications that were gained early in their life become less relevant than their life experience. This issue will become more prominent if the expected trend of Australians remaining in the workforce at older ages emerges.

The portfolio approach should foster the continuum of learning across a lifetime. A portfolio is not static, but will continue to evolve with an individual's education, employment and life experience.

### *The need for flexibility*

Portfolios will be used by individuals in different circumstances, at different points in their life, for the purpose of achieving different outcomes. Such differences mean that there will be a high degree of flexibility required in the portfolio approach. To meet the need for a flexible approach, it was suggested that some form of online or e-portfolio would be a desirable option; myfuture offers a widely used existing tool with links to other career education support.

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<sup>2</sup> The roles of education institutions and governments are considered in the project reports.

### *Access and equity*

Specific supports may be needed for some groups to achieve the outcomes that can be associated with an employability skills portfolio. This is especially true for those outside the education and work structures and those with low English language or information and communication technology literacy and those with a physical and/or intellectual disability. It is recognised that the portfolio is not a mechanism to address issues such as low English language literacy, however it will be necessary to set a base standard for usability.

### *Acceptability of self-assessment*

Different models of assessment were discussed including self-assessment, guided/assisted self-assessment and independent assessment. A portfolio is likely to include a combination of information including some that is self-assessed and some that is independently verified and independently assessed.

A particular question raised was about the value of self-assessed information in portfolios. Self-assessment undertaken by individuals is valid and there are approaches that can strengthen the self-assessment process. These approaches include providing guidance through case studies and exemplars to portfolio owners about the different types of employability skills and to demonstrate the continuum of skill development.

### *Data issues*

Information that supports the development and use of portfolios (by individuals and employers) should be readily accessible. One approach is to provide electronic access via existing websites such as myfuture (other approaches will also need to be considered to meet access and equity objectives). It was not considered appropriate or practical to have a single central data storage point for the individual portfolios. It was suggested that further options would need to be investigated.

### *Implementation issues*

A stakeholder engagement phase is required. In particular, it will be essential for employers to be fully engaged in any trials.

Recognition must be given to the range of relevant projects being undertaken in States and Territories and by education and industry sectors that are currently underway.

Supports will be needed to promote awareness and understanding of the employability skills and the portfolio approach. Different people have different needs and purposes and therefore a range of supports will need to be developed.

A phased introduction of the portfolio approach for the employability skills framework would be appropriate. The natural starting point may be with school students as they are readily identifiable as a potential group that will benefit developing an employability skills portfolio and because portfolios are a common feature of school work so are familiar to students and teachers.

There are also important roles for workplace supervisors, careers educators and services and community organisations in supporting the development of portfolios that need further consideration.

Consideration also needs to be given to using pilot approaches to test the usefulness of a portfolio and to developing tools and guides to support implementation. Included in this would be the need for portfolio owners and users to get feedback on how the portfolio meets the multiple outcomes.