



Australian Government

Department of Education, Science and Training

The Allen Consulting Group

Development of a strategy to support the universal recognition and recording of employability skills

ISSUES PAPER

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Project origins

This is a project to develop a strategy to support the universal recognition and recording of employability skills across schools, vocational education and training (VET), higher education and the broader community, including workplaces.

The universal recognition and recording of employability skills would entail cross-sectoral *recognition* of a common core set of employability skills and cross-sectoral acceptance of a common framework for the *recording* of attainment by individuals of these specified employability skills.

This project follows a number of actions in this area that have been recently undertaken, including:

- the National Training Quality Council undertaking work to scope implementation issues around employability skills in VET and develop strategies to support future implementation;
- Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) funded a project conducted by the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry to gather the views of industry on the critical skills required to facilitate employability in Australian workplaces. The project produced the report, *Employability Skills for the Future*;
- the (then) Enterprise and Career Education Foundation funded a project to examine the acquisition of employment related skills by secondary school students and other projects in relation to the recognition of employability skills;
- MCEETYA, in July 2002, agreed to collaborative work on employability skills across the schools, VET and higher education sectors and requested that ANTA coordinate a collaborative cross-sectoral approach to assessing the feasibility of implementing the Employability Skills Framework. ANTA has convened a cross-sectoral Employability Skills Working Group to progress the recommendations from MCEETYA;
- the (then) Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, funded ANTA to examine the potential to recognise the skills achieved by young people participating in youth development programs. Further activities with funding from the Department of Family and Community Services have followed to implement the *Due Credit* recommendations; and
- the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training has recently tabled its report on vocational education in schools, *Learning to Work*. This report recommends that employability skills be made a higher priority and developed through a range of strategies across the curriculum; and

- State and Commonwealth Education Ministers are currently considering the recommendation that they agree that the eight skills groupings outlined in the report *Employability Skills for the Future* includes skills that young people require for successful transition from school to a range of destinations, including work.

This project provides an opportunity to consolidate this considerable amount of existing work into a framework that has practical application across schools, VET, higher education and the broader community, including workplaces.

1.2 Project approach

The Department of Education, Science and Training has engaged a consortium involving The Allen Consulting Group, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and Cathy Down to develop an overarching strategy for the Universal Recognition and Recording of Employability Skills for schools, VET and higher education sectors, and the broader community, including workplaces.

The project will be conducted in two phases.

The first phase will involve fully scoping recognition and recording schemes, processes and arrangements to provide a conceptual framework for the universal recognition and recording strategy. The scoping will need to consider a range of approaches and their potential variations, including those using current AQF recognition and recording structures, as well as those outside the AQF.

The second phase will involve analysing the feasibility of the approach or approaches, and, if appropriate, recommending a feasible approach for the universal recognition and recording strategy. A Project Advisory Group that has been established by DEST will consider and provide feedback on the identified approach or approaches. The responsibility for the final decision on which approach is to be explored in detail will rest with the DEST Chair of the Project Advisory Group.

The project timeline has been developed to enable the second phase report to be finalised by 30 July 2004.

To help keep interested parties informed of project progress, a project website is operating at <http://www.allenconsult.com.au/employabilityskills>

The project will incorporate several stages of stakeholder consultation, namely:

- one-to-one discussions will be held between the project team and selected stakeholders during early May 2004;
- this Issues Paper, to which written responses from stakeholders are requested by 31st May 2004;
- a Directions Paper will be released on the project website on 22nd June 2004; and
- a National Stakeholder Forum is to be held in Melbourne on 29th June 2004.

1.3 The issues paper

This issues paper has been prepared as a guide to individuals and organisations making written submissions on the advantages and disadvantages of potential schemes, processes and arrangements for the universal recognition and recording of employability skills.

In *Chapter Two* this issues paper provides some further context for this study and then in *Chapter Three* identifies four issues and requests comment on questions about these issues. Respondents are also welcome to raise issues beyond those set out in this paper.

The four issues identified in *Chapter Three* surround:

- the need for an agreed set of design principles against which a universal recognition and recording framework should be assessed – effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and transparency are suggested as four high level principles that a framework should be built on and judged against;
- how attainment of employability skills can be demonstrated to others within a universal recognition and recording framework – a skills portfolio approach is suggested as an option that may complement other current and potential formal recognition approaches;
- the potential applications of a common framework for employability skills recognition and recording – with the variety of potential applications for a skills portfolio having implications for the form skills portfolios should take; and
- the roles for different stakeholders in the system to support employability skills development and demonstration – a number of stakeholders may need to either undertake tasks that they have not previously been engaged in or to expand their activities in certain areas.

Responses to the issues paper should be sent to dbuckeridge@allenconsult.com.au and are required by 31st May 2004.

Chapter 2

Context

2.1 The need for a universal employability skills recognition and recording framework

Australian workplaces are transforming to meet the intertwined challenges of the knowledge economy and globalisation. This is reflected in the employability skills framework that is the focus of this project.¹

The goal of achieving high performing workplaces with trained and flexible employees is familiar to the education and training sectors and these imperatives underpinned the Mayer competencies. What is new is the rapidly increasing value to business of intangible assets. This subtle and yet profound transformation is placing greater weight on employee characteristics such as the capacity for innovation and creativity, team-work and customer service. The profile of these skills and attributes is therefore becoming more important both in the substance and outcomes from all aspects of education and training, including workplaces.

A universal employability skills framework is consistent with the need for individuals to embrace life long learning that traverses sectoral and community boundaries. Rigid boundaries in education and training sectors are not consistent with employment pathways where individuals change employers and possibly industries and experience various working arrangements from full-time to part-time to casual and so on. An employability skills framework can provide a tool for the individual that can help to develop a life-long career pathway. It can assist individuals as they make transitions both between education and the workplace and when making transitions within education and work pathways.

Employers will benefit if there is a known framework that can assist in the task of assessing the generic skills of potential employees. Explicit information about employability skills would be a useful addition to information already available on academic achievements and vocational competencies. The information is relevant to employers in recruitment processes and when developing training plans for existing employees.

A universal employability skills framework also has the potential to assist groups who are marginal to the workforce and equity groups that are disadvantaged in the workplace. This benefit would be realised if the framework opened up the possibility of recognition for skills gained outside conventional structures and by providing access to transition and skill development pathways.

It is important to note here that a universal recognition and recording framework for employability skills does not necessarily require a universal formal assessment and accreditation process for employability skills to be established. A universal recognition and recording framework in its simplest conception is about allowing for a common approach to be adopted by individuals to gather and present material that demonstrates their employability skills attainment to all interested parties – be they prospective employers or education institutions.

¹ Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA) March 2002, *Employability Skills for the Future*, DEST Canberra.

It is possible that a universal recognition and recording framework will complement existing and future formal assessment and certification processes developed for education and training institutions.

2.2 An opportunity to build on existing research

An objective of this project is to build on existing work by developing practical approaches that make identification and development of employability skills an explicit part of education and training programs, career planning and employment decisions. In developing a strategy to support the universal recognition and recording of employability skills across sectors, the project will consider national and international experience of employability skills frameworks in practice as well as the research literature.

Employability skills are those ‘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 direction’ as described within the report *Employability Skills for the Future*². The report identified those key generic employability skills that employers expect employees to have, along with job specific technical skills. These *employability* skills are also seen as prerequisites for self-employment and for success in other domains of life.

These employability skills are *clusters* of skills. Specific examples of them will vary depending upon the context in which they are developed and applied. Any precise definition and assessment of these clusters of skills will therefore need to be tailored according to the particular context in which they are developed and applied.

The resulting Employability Skills Framework provided the following set of eight key generic employability skills with a range of examples of their application, which vary depending on the context in which they are applied:

- **communication** skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers;
- **team work** skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes;
- **problem-solving** skills that contribute to productive outcomes;
- **initiative and enterprise** skills that contribute to productive outcomes;
- **planning and organising** skills that contribute to productive outcomes;
- **self-management** skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth;
- **learning** skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes; and
- **technology** skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks.

² Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) & the Business Council of Australia (BCA) March 2002, *Employability Skills for the Future*, DEST, Canberra, page 3.

It is acknowledged that some institutions or education systems may include a focus on some other generic skills in addition to the eight employability skills groupings. However, this project will focus specifically on the eight employability skills groupings as set out in the Employability Skills Framework.

State and Commonwealth Education Ministers are currently considering the following recommendations:

- that they agree that the eight skills groupings outlined in the report *Employability Skills for the Future* includes skills that young people require for successful transition from school to a range of destinations, including work;
- that they note that the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training in consultation with the Transition from School Taskforce and other stakeholders is undertaking further work on possible strategies to implement the employability skills in the schooling sector, including possible assessment and reporting models. Progress will be reported to MCEETYA in 2004; and
- that they agree that the Employability Skills Framework be referred to the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee project on developing statements of learning that define and deliver common curriculum outcomes so that they may assist in identifying the “generic and trans-disciplinary capabilities and understandings from the National Goals of ‘Schooling’” that are to be integrated in this project.

National endorsement of these eight key employability skills would provide additional impetus for the development of a universal framework for the recognition and recording of the set of eight groups of employability skills within and across the education and employment sectors and the broader community in Australia.

Cross-sectoral acceptance of these eight key employability skills is important for the development of a universal employability skills recognition and recording framework. Such universal *recognition* of what the core employability skills are allows us to focus now on how attainment of these agreed core skills can be *recorded* within a common framework.

2.3 Employability skills and broader educational objectives

The successful development of a universal employability skills framework must recognise the place of generic employability skills in the context of the broader educational objectives of the specific education sectors. Generic skill development is implicit, and increasingly becoming explicit, in current education and training in all sectors. Generic skills are also developed outside formal education pathways. This project is about exploring ways that the employability skills can be made explicit and useful to individuals and employers, without creating an undue burden on those providing education and training.

It is evident differences exist across sectors and states and territories in the approach to employability skills.

Within the higher education sector generic skill development underpins approaches to teaching and learning. The importance of generic skill development in the university sector could be seen as consistent with the development of a universal employability skills framework. However, the autonomous nature of university operations presents a potential challenge to the development of such a framework. Thus while some institutions are engaging with the concepts (eg constructing skills portfolios and a structure for graduate capabilities), many universities may prefer their own language and may resist a universal framework.

Much work has been undertaken in the VET sector to develop a framework that embeds the employability skills into the Training Packages. In this way, employability skills would be treated comparably with all other skills and with multiple ways to assess and demonstrate levels of attainment.

In the schools sector generic skill development underpins approaches to teaching and learning. The schools sector presents some good examples of the use of frameworks to identify employability skills, for example, skills passports. However, there is concern with the compatibility of a framework with the rigour of senior secondary assessment and certification and how to ensure that employability skills 'fit' with the drive for generic skills coming from The National Goals for Schooling. Under the National Goals the development of generic skills in school settings is seen to be vital as we move towards a lifelong learning paradigm for work and for life generally.

Finally, employability skills will be developed both inside and outside formal education pathways. Informal pathways accessed in the community sector, such as the participation in youth development activities, contribute to the development of a wide range of generic skills. A universally recognised framework should be able to recognise and record employability skills such as these developed outside the formal education sectors.

There is the expectation from business and individuals that the often rigid boundaries between education and training sectors need to be dissolved or, at least, blurred. While sectors do have distinct roles and responsibilities, many differences are historically determined but, to users of the systems, they appear arbitrary. The application of a universal employability skills framework provides a practical way of finding cross-sectoral approaches that will allow individuals to develop, and value their employability skills and to effectively demonstrate their attainment of these skills to others.

Chapter Three

Issues and questions for discussion

Issue One: Principles against which a universal recognition and recording framework should be assessed

It is important when establishing a universal recognition and recording framework for employability skills that the strengths and weaknesses of any proposed models are assessed against appropriate best practice principles.

A number of general principles of good public policy might also apply as best practice principles for a universal recognition framework. Basic principles of good public policy, noted by bodies such as the Auditor General, the Australian National Audit Office, and the Department of Finance and Administration³, include:

- **effectiveness** – meeting the principle of effectiveness in the context of universal employability skills recognition and recording requires that the framework supports the clear and accurate communication of the employability skills held by the individual;
- **efficiency** – meeting the principle of efficiency would require the proposed framework to deliver the desired outcomes with the minimum possible administrative and implementation resource intensity;
- **accountability** – to meet the principle of accountability requires the proposed framework to identify and articulate the roles and responsibilities of all parties in the system, and to provide for scrutiny of the performance of all parties in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities; and
- **transparency** – to meet the principle of transparency requires the framework to provide for communication of full, accurate and clear information to all parties within the system.

Within each of these high level best practice principles, but particularly within the effectiveness principle, a number of more detailed specific performance criteria will need to be used. To assess effectiveness, for instance, it will be necessary to consider criteria such as whether the framework is sufficiently *flexible* to cater for the diversity of information needs associated with the different stakeholders and to ensure that these different needs are met and whether the framework ensures the *validity* and *reliability* of claims of employability skills attainment.

³ See for instance, Barrett, P.J., Auditor General for Australia, (2001), *Dealing with risks to ensure greater effectiveness*, Presentation to IIR conference, Canberra, 1st May 2001; ANAO, (2003) *Public Sector Governance, Volume 1, Better Practice Guide*; Department of Finance and Administration, (2002), *Commonwealth Procurement Guidelines and Best Practice Guidance*

Questions

- 1.1 Are the above high level best practice policy design principles appropriate criteria against which any proposed universal employability skills recognition and recording framework should be assessed?**
- 1.2 If not, what high level criteria would it be appropriate to judge a universal recognition framework against?**
- 1.3 If these four high level principles are appropriate, what detailed performance criteria should be used to assess performance against each of the high level best practice principles?**

Issue Two: How attainment of employability skills can be demonstrated to others within a universal recognition and recording framework

A portfolio approach to employability skills demonstration appears to be perhaps the most promising mechanism for the demonstration of employability skills.

An employability skills portfolio (sometimes labelled a ‘skills passport’) would provide a collection of a person’s employability skills achievements in a single location. It could provide a portable means of presenting a person’s skills to an employer, or a private record of a person’s self-reflection and affirmation. It could be a collection of evidence that the person gives to a Registered Training Organisation, or a framework to guide career decisions.

The key point is that it provides a framework for individuals to collect and present material that demonstrates their attainment of the eight employability skills identified in the Employability Skills Framework. The provision of information regarding the context within which skills have been developed and demonstrated will also be potentially valuable to those utilising a skills portfolio in their decision making processes.

If the portfolio is to be used to support employment or further study applications, the skills identified in the portfolio will need to be validated in some way. This evidence in the portfolio will need to be valid, current, authentic and sufficient. A list of skills on a piece of paper can be included as part of a person’s evidence from self-reflection, but it cannot be the only piece of evidence. In some cases, they will need documented and signed evidence that they have these skills.

Questions

- 2.1 Are there any other approaches to demonstrating employability skills that may be preferable to a portfolio approach?
- 2.2 What format should portfolios take, and is it important that portfolios are able to be displayed and distributed in electronic format?
- 2.3 How important is evidence within an employability skills portfolio and what types of evidence should be considered sufficient to demonstrate skills attainment?
- 2.4 Given the potentially diverse audiences for an individual's portfolio, how should the trade off between comprehensiveness and useability be managed?
- 2.5 What are current examples of skills portfolios, or other approaches to the demonstration of generic skills, being developed and used in Australia and what lessons do these examples provide?
- 2.6 How could a portfolio approach complement other formal assessment processes (for instance, a common Graduate Skills Assessment test, a Certificate I in Employability Skills and a Diploma accredited within the AQF or other formal assessment and certification processes developed for education and training institutions)?

Issue Three: The potential applications of a common framework for employability skills recognition and recording

At face value, an employability skills portfolio is simply the collection of a person's achievements in a single location. Beyond this, the value of an employability skills portfolio is dependent on its use.

There appear to be several potential uses for an employability skills portfolio that reports attainment against the set of eight groupings of employability skills. Potential uses include:

- within the schools, VET, higher education, community and workplace contexts, the employability skills portfolio of individuals can inform the explicit development of these skills within the education and training provided to individuals;
- Schools and VET institutions could factor in the employability skills portfolio of individuals when assessing applicants for entry to courses and for assisting individuals following graduation. ;
- universities could factor in the employability skills portfolio of individuals when assessing applicants for entry to courses and for assisting individuals following graduation;
- employers could factor in the employability skills portfolio of applicants when assessing applicants for employment and promotion; and

- individuals could use the employability skills portfolio to guide their personal and career development and to assist with transitions between work and study.

It should be acknowledged that some of the above applications for employability skills demonstration are already occurring across the education and training, community and workplace sectors.

Questions

- 3.1 **Given the different potential applications of employability skills portfolios, is it possible to develop a common portfolio format or will it be necessary for portfolios to be structured differently for different applications?**
- 3.2 **If different structures for the demonstration of employability skills are needed for different demonstration purposes, could a small number of templates be developed - for instance, one template for job seeking, one for application to further education, one for guiding personal development?**
- 3.3 **How important is it that a common understanding of the eight employability skill clusters is adopted across sectors?**
- 3.4 **Is it realistic for education and training institutions to incorporate employability skills into their criteria for consideration of individuals?**
- 3.5 **Is it realistic for employers to incorporate the terminology of the employability skills framework into their criteria for considering the employment and/or career advancement of individuals?**
- 3.6 **If employability skills portfolios are to be included in the assessment of applicants for entry to courses, employment or career advancement, what standards of evidence of skills attainment would be needed within portfolios?**

Issue Four: The roles for different stakeholders in the system to support employability skills development and demonstration

Support for individuals to build and demonstrate employability skills will be needed. This is particularly true if the responsibility for gathering, organising and appropriately presenting information that demonstrates their attainment of employability skills is to reside with individuals.

If the development and demonstration of employability skills is to be progressed in a co-ordinated way across Australia, a number of stakeholders may be required to either undertake tasks that they have not previously been engaged in or to expand their activities in certain areas. For instance:

- education and training institutions at all levels may need to engage in the explicit teaching of the eight groupings of the employability skills;

- greater levels of mentoring services to support portfolio development may be needed and there may be organisations, including those that are Australian Government funded (for instance Job Network and the DEST Local Community Partnerships) and State and Territory Government funded (for instance the Victorian and South Australian regional networks), that could play an important role;
- portfolio template packages may need to be developed and distributed;
- employers may need to actively support the acceptance of the eight groupings of the employability skills and adopt these groupings within their internal training processes; and
- awareness raising of the eight employability skills groupings and the framework for employability skills recognition will be needed amongst individuals, employers, education and training institutions, community groups and other stakeholders.

Questions

- 4.1 Is it reasonable for responsibility for the gathering, organising and presenting material that demonstrates employability skills to reside with individuals?**
- 4.2 Is it realistic within the schools, VET, higher education, community and workplace contexts for employability skills to be explicitly incorporated into education and training programs?**
- 4.3 What support can be provided to individuals as they seek to develop and demonstrate their employability skills, and which stakeholders are best placed to provide such support?**
- 4.4 What new activities by stakeholders will be needed to fully implement the development and demonstration of employability skills within a universal recognition and recording framework?**
- 4.5 What inputs, in terms of both people and supporting infrastructure, would be required to enable such activities to be undertaken?**
- 4.6 What existing communication channels could be utilised in awareness raising activities and what, if any, new communication strategies will need to be developed?**