

National VET Equity Advisory Council

# Summary of Equity Stakeholder Messages: October – November 2009

## **Introduction**

This document is a summary of the messages that stakeholders raised during the recent introductory forums attended by members of the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC). The summary has been organised into 8 themes: Barriers; Recognising the diverse ways people become engaged in training; Pathways and pathway planning; Support required; Investment and funding; Employers and employment; Outcomes, Targets and performance measures; and VET system challenges.

We emphasise that the views collected in the forums and summarised in this document are not those of NVEAC, but are the views of the stakeholders who attended.

NVEAC was established in mid 2009 to provide high level advice to the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) which will guide equity reform in the national training system.

In late 2009 NVEAC conducted a series of targeted stakeholder forums across Australia. The stakeholder forums were organised in partnership with the state and territory departments of education and training to provide the new Council members with a high level snapshot of some of the issues of concern to equity groups. At least one forum was held in every State and Territory, with three being held in Victoria and two in the Northern Territory.

The forums were attended by a range of stakeholder groups. These included representatives from public and private providers, Group Training Organisations, Apprenticeship Centres, community RTOs, community service organisations, government departments, Industry Skills Councils, employers, industry employer and employee groups and equity groups.

The stakeholders who attended represented a wide range of VET sector clients including people with disability, young people disengaged from schooling, older people seeking to enter or re-enter the workforce, refugees and migrants, indigenous people, people living in disadvantaged locations, people in correctional institutions and people experiencing hardship, homelessness and those who had low skills.

Many of the issues stakeholders raised during discussion were common to all disadvantaged learners, highlighting the importance of a systemic approach to equity reform.

In addition to noting the synergies across groups, Council recognised that it is important not to lose sight of individual groups and the particular issues and barriers they face.

The National VET Equity Advisory Council will continue to consult with stakeholders over the next 12 months and take account of the body of literature and research on how to achieve improved outcomes for disadvantaged learners. Its focus will be systemic as it begins to formulate its advice to ministers.

## **Thematic summary of stakeholder forums held by NVEAC in October – November 2009**

### **1. Barriers**

Stakeholders spoke about a range of barriers, such as those caused by society and its attitudes, the labour market, the education sector, access to services, the VET system and those residing within the individual:

- Society-wide attitudinal barriers such as discrimination, disrespect or ignorance about different cultures.
- Economic and employability barriers that exist because skill demands have increased while attainment levels for disadvantaged learners have often stayed static and in some cases declined.
- Barriers within the education sector. For some disadvantaged learners the level of attainment in foundation skills is lower than that required to participate fully in tertiary education and employment.
- Barriers caused by limited access to services, such as housing, transport (including lack of a driver's licence) and childcare.
- Individual barriers caused by low self esteem, lack of confidence and lack of self belief; lack of literacy and numeracy and basic foundation skills; lack of life skills.
- VET system barriers including the lack of support or resources required for disadvantaged students; the lack of assessment around the particular issues/barriers facing an individual; the impact that pricing models can have on the training and support available.

### **2. Recognising the diverse ways people become engaged in training**

Stakeholders reflected on the importance of community-based providers and the provision of both non-accredited and accredited training to disadvantaged students:

- The role played by the community sector needs to be valued and recognised, as this sector is often a gateway for disadvantaged students.
- The community sector often provides disadvantaged learners with the motivation to participate and become engaged with the world.
- Non-accredited training and Certificates I and II are important for learners who have not engaged much with education and need to build confidence, and gain foundation and life skills. They are part of a pathway to training, leading to employment or community based outcomes.

- Lower level courses should be seen as bridging programs and as pathways to further learning.
- Targets could be set for gaining foundation skills; people cannot progress to and attain Certificate III and above until they have attained foundation skills and have a year 12 or equivalent.

### **3. Pathways and pathway planning**

Stakeholders expressed the view that transitions and pathways within vocational education and training deserved more attention. Points raised relating to pathways included the following:

- The transition from training and education to employment needs to be funded. For example, people moving from unemployment to employment through Job Services Australia receive funding, but the transition from training to employment is not supported and disadvantaged learners require support at this transition point.
- While employment is considered the ultimate aim of participation in vocational education and training, there should be recognition that not all pathways lead to employment in the first instance.
- For the disadvantaged learner there are a range of pathways and these varying and multi-directional pathway options need to be supported, not only a select few pathways.
- An important issue is career planning and career counselling and the need for accessible and topical information on courses and the job outcomes they can lead to. A critical component of this is planning, at the outset, the education and training pathway (including foundation studies) which will lead to an occupational outcome.

### **4. Support required**

Stakeholders relayed that support for disadvantaged learners is crucial and that this support should be built into the training and education experience of the disadvantaged learner. In particular, they identified that:

- Support can take many forms: making a learner feel valued; building self esteem and confidence; providing language, literacy and numeracy training; mentoring, coaching, case management, counselling; access to technology and interpreters.
- Some learners require consistent support from family or carers. Maintaining participation in education and training can become less of a priority when more immediate needs have to be addressed. Thus a coordinated approach, with specialist trainers, carers and volunteers working together is needed.
- Providing the required support means being resourced to do so; having flexibility built into the amount of time allocated to delivery and having a funding model with a loading or extra component built in.

- Consideration should be given to funding specialist advisers or counsellors with specific knowledge on equity issues, to advise learners on the range of support they can access. Support is not a 'one size fits all'.
- It is important that offering support does not entrench dependency. Support needs to, wherever possible, encourage independence. For some barriers assistive technology plays an important role in encouraging independence.
- Training providers may need greater flexibility in the time allowed to deliver training to give learners with complex needs the best chance of successfully completing their training.
- Stakeholders spoke of the need for ongoing support, including language and literacy, as learners move on to higher qualifications.
- Volunteers play an important role in supporting disadvantaged learners.

## **5. Investment & Funding**

Investment and funding was raised at every forum. Comments from stakeholders on funding related to:

- The need for investment for learner support to cover tutoring, coaching, assistive technology, interpreters, counselling, life skills support, careers counselling, active case management.
- Funding for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to provide the support that disadvantaged learners need and to ensure their staff have the skills to deal with learners with complex needs.
- Current funding models based on Actual Student Contact Hours (ASCH) do not accommodate the additional cost of support that many disadvantaged learners require.
- Consideration should be given to the VET sector adopting the higher education sector approach to funding, and to providing additional funding per student from low socio-economic backgrounds to the higher education institutions so they can provide the support required.
- Investment and funding models should allow linkages and partnerships to be developed for work with targeted groups.
- In Victoria, some stakeholders expressed concern that the demand driven model in Victoria would have an impact on Adult Community Education (ACE) provision. Although it may mean that more funding flows to ACE, some stakeholders believed that it may impact on the cost to the individual, as well as access to foundation level skills.
- Small grants programs are often funded under the 'equity' banner and can lead to good outcomes. However stakeholders felt that too often pilot programs are funded and then abandoned or changed, and as a result the programs lose their unique contribution.

- Funding for community initiatives, transport, and childcare should be considered as well as the funding for training and support. These contribute to improved participation and outcomes for disadvantaged learners as well.

## **6. Employers and Employment**

Stakeholders emphasised employment and employers as a means to improve participation and outcomes for disadvantaged learners. Comments about employers and employment included:

- A person's self esteem grows through engagement with work; they become more socially engaged and will be better placed to do more training and education.
- Employers should receive greater encouragement to employ people from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Social inclusion should be promoted as a means of bringing economic benefit and as a way of giving back to the community. However at times employers feel that there are onerous requirements involved and therefore they may need increased support.
- Some stakeholders expressed concern that Certificate I and II courses do not adequately prepare learners for work. Work experience and short employment enabling courses, such as barista training and first aid, are important as they build confidence and independence.

## **7. Outcomes, targets & performance measures**

Stakeholders told NVEAC that measuring performance of the training system in terms of what the disadvantaged learner gains from participating in VET is critical. Key points related to outcomes, targets and performance measures were:

- That low socio-economic status is a good measure for disadvantaged learners and further work needs to be done to refine this measure. This measure is one which both schools and universities use for reporting.
- The ultimate desired outcome of training and education is sustained employment. In remote communities however, employment may not be a realistic expectation given the location and availability of employment. Therefore alternatives such as a community based outcomes may be the aim.
- Other outcomes resulting from training are important too. These range from gaining self respect and self esteem, gaining life skills, better self management and interpersonal skills through to engagement as a citizen in the community. It is felt that these non-job outcomes need to be valued as for some learners job outcomes may be a 'long road'.
- Registered training organisations should be able to demonstrate on registration their capability and capacity to deliver outcomes for the disadvantaged learner.

## 8. VET system challenges

Stakeholders had the opportunity to present their perspectives of the major systemic challenges in the VET system. Major systemic challenges identified were:

- Stakeholders questioned the impact on disadvantaged students of a demand driven training system and the delivery of training in a contestable environment.
- The very notion of competence could be widened – from a limited notion of competence for work, to one of competence for applying skills and competence in social and cultural settings too.
- The problems facing the disadvantaged learner are often entrenched and training is not the sole answer. Reform in terms of making the system more equitable for the disadvantaged learner means addressing broader issues such as transport, housing, health, justice and other social issues and achieving better coordination of services and support.
- Achieving system reform with a view to ensuring the disadvantaged learner gains the support they need in order to achieve comparable outcomes to other learners, means looking at every aspect of the training and education system and questioning whether the disadvantaged learner's needs are being taken into account.
- The National Partnership on Productivity Places Program and the National Agreement on Skills and Workforce Development do not include any specific equity related funding.