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Dusting off the shelves: Getting the most value out of vocational education and training equity resources

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Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Dusting off the shelves: Getting the most value out of vocational education and training equity resources—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1700.html>.

Foreword

This project forms part of the national program of vocational education and training (VET) research managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments.

The study identifies the key factors relating to the take-up and use of equity resources in the VET sector. It documents success factors as well as lessons that have been learnt from less successful experiences. Consultations were held with over 120 representatives from across the VET sector, including federal and state funding bodies, industry skills councils, resource development managers with public and private providers, training managers and coordinators, practitioners and industry organisations.

The report is particularly important to those groups who have invested in these resources. It strongly suggests the need to reconceptualise the primary goal of equity resource development so that it is focused on uptake and use rather than just product development.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director

Readers interested in the uptake and use of equity resources are referred to the following companion project:

✧ Figgis, J, Butorac, A, Clayton, B, Meyers, D, Dickie, M, Malley, J & McDonald, R, forthcoming, *Advancing equity: Merging 'bottom-up' initiatives with 'top-down' strategies*, Adelaide, NCVER.

To find other material of interest, search VOCED (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <http://www.voced.edu.au>) using the following keywords: educational resources; equity group; learning support; professional development; resources material; resources development.

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Key messages

This report identifies the key factors which enable or provide barriers to the use of equity resources in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. These resources, which come in a variety of online or print formats, are an important means of helping teachers, trainers and others who deliver VET to provide extra help for those with special support needs.

✧ Although good-quality learning resources are available via websites and pamphlets, their existence is not enough to ensure that they will actually be used. To ensure that VET equity resources are used requires the establishment of new processes before and after their development. This will provide a better return for the considerable public and professional investment into equity learning resource development in vocational education and training.

✧ The report generated a number of strategies to encourage the use of equity resources:
  ♦ developing longer-term funding models which would allow developers to build in consultation, trialling and marketing of the resources, as well as post-production tracking of their use and usefulness
  ♦ integrating professional development with VET practitioners into the resource development stage, so that these practitioners will not only be already familiar with the resources, but can also develop the ability to customise them to meet students' needs
  ♦ linking use of the equity resources to external strategic drivers, such as regulatory compliance or the implementation of training packages
  ♦ standardising the annotation of specific resources in databases or catalogues to include information about the resources so that potential users can make informed decisions about their value
  ♦ lodging the resources on agreed selected websites and creating links between the various websites to promote their wider use
  ♦ using targeted marketing strategies to promote the resources through a range of industry and professional networks
  ♦ promoting the resources as accessible for all learners, rather than only those with 'special needs', thereby encouraging their usefulness within the entire VET sector.

Executive summary

Overview and purpose of study

Over the last two decades, the importance of valuing and managing diversity in vocational education and training (VET) has been increasingly reflected in both policy and practice. During this period, policies have aimed to create an inclusive, equitable and flexible VET system which takes into account barriers arising from gender, culture, language and literacy, disability, isolation and multiple disadvantage. Australian Quality Training Framework standards (ANTA 2005), to which VET providers adhere, have built in regulatory requirements that acknowledge the diversity of all VET clients. Special policies for identified equity target groups have also been developed through specific national strategies.

Using federal, state, industry and community funds, developers such as teachers, trainers and consultants have created a wide range of high-quality equity learning resources so that national policy in this area results in changed practices at all levels. Equity resources are those which are specifically designed to enhance the ability of learners with identified needs to engage successfully with vocational education and training. The aim of these resources is to assist teachers, trainers and other personnel delivering vocational education and training to learners with identified support needs.

This project set out to identify key factors which enable or provide barriers to the use and implementation of equity resources in the VET sector. It sought to document success factors, as well as lessons that could be learnt from less successful experiences. Consultations were held with over 120 representatives from different parts of the VET sector. These include federal and state funding bodies, industry skills councils, teaching and learning resource development managers within public and private training providers, training managers and coordinators, practitioners, and industry organisations.

Summary of findings

We found that many of the equity learning resources that exist have either been under-used or have had limited impact. As a result, there has been a low return on the considerable public and professional investment in resource development.

The research strongly suggests that the quality of VET equity resources is not perceived as a major issue in whether or not they are used. Where they are known about, resources are generally highly valued for the appropriateness of their content and design and their user-friendliness for the intended audience. The major issues regarding their uptake and implementation are concerned with both the pre-product and the post-development stages. Key limitations and enablers of the uptake and implementation of VET equity resources were grouped into four distinct but interrelated areas: funding models and policies; accessibility and pricing; resource development; and organisational support and professional development issues.

Funding models and policies

A number of pre- and post-development activities are crucial to the uptake and implementation of high-quality equity learning resources in the VET sector; some of these issues also need to be

addressed in the production stages. These include adequate scoping of a particular area for conducting an environmental scan; confirming the need for the resource; establishing collaborative partnerships between potential resource developers; developing realistic time frames; ensuring adequate budgets for marketing; and disseminating, tracking and evaluating resources once they have been developed.

The limited duration of current funding cycles (currently 12 months) encourages a focus on volume and turnover rather than on actual usage. Respondents suggested a longer-term funding cycle, or a staged funding process, which means that the product has a lifespan of up to five years. This enables the establishment of processes to ensure that the resource is widely promoted, used and evaluated with a view to updating and modification where necessary. Linking resources to existing major cycles such as the five-yearly training package reviews was suggested by a number of respondents as a strategic way of promoting uptake, ensuring appropriate levels of evaluation, and minimising wastage of high-quality resources.

Factors contributing to ongoing duplication of resources include the large number of funding and distribution bodies involved in resource development (which appear to have few links with similar bodies); ineffective dissemination and marketing; and the lack of understanding of copyright clearances.

While a number of quality assurance mechanisms have been integrated into the development stages as part of funding policies and guidelines, there is currently very little systematic evaluation of the resources produced. The lack of evaluative criteria and mechanisms and resources for undertaking evaluation means that there are few objective measures currently available to gauge the effectiveness of VET equity learning products in achieving their aims.

Accessibility and pricing

Most respondents interviewed were not aware of or familiar with learning resources and databases highly relevant to their work. Many reported feeling overwhelmed by the number and variety of existing databases and frustrated by the time-consuming and difficult task of locating the most useful sites and relevant information. While many welcomed the prospect of a 'one-stop shop' for accessing resources, a number of concerns were raised in relation to the potential complexity of such a huge site. The concerns included the possibility of equity resources being 'swamped' by other VET resources on the site, the loss of specialist equity expertise and ownership, and increased cost. A number of suggestions were made for multiple access points in databases where users could discover the resources; these would be linked to centralised distribution points.

Respondents did not consider the way resource developers used websites and specialist databases as the main dissemination and distribution strategy for equity resources to be effective. In order to be useful, online databases require ongoing maintenance and adequate resourcing, and in many instances this does not occur. Consistent descriptors and annotations attached to resources, along with samples and short peer reviews, are necessary to help potential users to make an informed choice prior to purchase. The increasing collaborations and alliances between national and state distributors of VET resources, featuring actual viewing sites in a number of capital cities, are likely to enable easier access to a greater range of resources.

In general, however, websites and catalogues were seen as ineffective substitutes for practitioner professional development in the use of resources, active promotion throughout industry, and targeted marketing strategies, all of which would enable practitioners to become familiar with the new resources and develop confidence and skills in their use.

Developers acknowledged the current 'hit and miss' nature of their dissemination strategies, which were often short-term and limited to the immediate post-production period, with knowledge of the resource mainly being passed by word of mouth after this period. However, they saw this as unavoidable, given their skills and resourcing levels.

The inconsistent and relatively high pricing of equity resources by some distributors was also considered by many respondents to the study to act as a disincentive to their use.

Resource development

Uptake and implementation of equity learning resources is enhanced by linking the resources to external factors such as regulatory compliance or quality assurance, or by directly aligning them to training packages. In the current climate of skill shortages, many respondents favoured linking equity and diversity management more closely to enhanced economic and business outcomes. Enabling all learners to become effective workers, including those who need support during the learning process, benefits the economy. Moreover, the packaging of equity VET resources as user-friendly, accessible resources for *all* learners—not just those who require support—would increase their profile and their perceived relevance, accessibility and use in the VET system. The possible exception to this seemed to be resources developed for Indigenous learners who required specific contextualisation to local cultural requirements.

The research indicated that the relevance and effectiveness of equity VET resources was significantly enhanced by the active involvement of industry and learner representatives; involvement confers 'ownership' of the resource and subsequent endorsement by industry. Respondents also noted that the effectiveness of VET resources was likely to be increased with the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach to their development within a quality assurance framework such as that conferred by National Training Information Service endorsement.

The uptake of resources designed for registered training organisation trainers and assessors was encouraged by practical, solution-based approaches that provided realistic models of good practice in 'bite-size chunks'.

Organisational support and professional development

Equity learning resource developers are often not in a position to influence the outcomes a resource is intended to deliver, and there is a lack of understanding of who is responsible for actively promoting a resource to its target users. The endorsement of resources by industry and senior registered training organisation management, as well as a supportive culture within the VET system, are critical factors in sustaining changed teaching, learning and assessment practices.

Professional development activities, designed to familiarise practitioners with new learning resources, can be usefully and systematically integrated as part of the resource development or implementation process. Resource developers commented on the different ways by which VET practitioners could be involved in the development process; for example, in the scoping and needs analysis stages, and in the trialling and evaluation of drafts.

Practitioners valued focused, practical professional development activities that enabled them to engage and develop confidence with the new resources and the associated improvements to teaching or technologies. In many instances, these activities promoted the formation of 'communities of practice' between various practitioners, which enable ongoing contact and support in areas of particular learning, training and assessment. Respondents reported that these communities of practice supported practitioners in the implementation of equity resources and therefore more inclusive teaching and assessment practices.

Implications

The research findings strongly suggest the need for policy-makers and funders to fundamentally reconceptualise the primary goal of equity resource development such that it becomes the uptake and use of resources. In this way individual and organisational equity outcomes rather than merely product completion will be achieved.

Context and methodology

Research purpose

Substantial amounts of public funding are directed each year towards the development of equity learning resources. These resources aim to support teachers, trainers, and other organisational personnel in the delivery of flexible and appropriate training and assessment to learners with identified support needs in the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

Although tighter controls have recently been established to help ensure the high quality of these resources and their relationship to the wider VET agenda, relatively little is known about the extent of their uptake and implementation by registered training organisations and workplaces, and their impact on VET practice and outcomes.

This research aims to identify key enablers and barriers to the uptake of equity resources and their implementation in the VET system by surveying the views and experiences of stakeholders at as many levels as possible.

Research questions

The original research questions were refined during the early consultation stages. Although the research initially anticipated identifying a small number of key or commonly used resources and investigating the reasons for their apparent effectiveness, it quickly became evident that few resources appeared to be widely used, and that the real issues relating to equity resource uptake and implementation were not with the quality of the resources themselves but with the processes involved in their development.

The research questions therefore became:

◇ What are the key enablers of equity resource uptake and implementation? What are the barriers?

◇ How do we know when a resource has been effective?

◇ What appear to be the most useful and sustainable strategies for developing, disseminating and implementing equity and diversity resources? What are the most useful access and distribution points and databases?

◇ What improvements are needed to funding models, policies and guidelines and coordination to avoid duplication and to maximise the use and impact of current and future resources?

Definitions

For the purposes of this research, 'equity' is a term used to cover issues relating 'to access to VET, participation in VET, and achievement of outcomes in VET' (Robertson et al. 2004a, p.8). Some equity policies and resources adopt an inclusive approach to equity, whereas others target specific needs of identified groups, such as learners with disabilities. 'Resources' are understood to be physical rather than human resources. Physical resources included print resources, videos, CD-ROMs and DVDs, audiotapes, online resources and adaptive technologies. Regardless of their

merit, human resources, such as mentors, specialist teachers, trainers or support persons, disability consultants, professional development staff and other organisational support persons, were not the specific focus of the report. Thus equity resources were considered to be any resources, either specifically designed to or actually enhancing the ability of learners to successfully engage with vocational education and training.

Environmental scan

A preliminary scan of key national policies and strategies was undertaken to identify existing and recent approaches to equity and cultural diversity issues in VET. A preliminary literature review was also conducted, focusing on issues in resource development, and equity resource development in particular. However, this scan was limited since, although issues impacting on the uptake and implementation of equity resources could be anticipated, they could not be precisely identified at this stage.

Development of questionnaires

Two questionnaires were developed to canvass the perspectives of resource development managers and those in related positions (appendix 2 in the support document) and practitioners (appendix 3 in the support document). These questionnaires tended to be used as discussion triggers and focus questions rather than systematically—largely because respondents were often pressed for time. Respondents were representative of many levels of equity resources development, including federal and state funding bodies, industry skills councils, resource development managers within public and private training providers, private resource developers, training managers and coordinators, practitioners and industry representatives. Over 120 respondents were interviewed.

Focus groups

Due to the difficulty of reaching significant numbers of individual practitioners, practitioner focus groups were held where possible. These focus groups were often piggybacked onto scheduled professional development activities or meetings to minimise disruption to teaching schedules. Ten focus groups were held (appendix 1 in the support document).

Identification of key issues

Common concerns were identified from the initial responses, and a second round of follow-up discussions with selected persons was conducted. These discussions tended to focus more specifically on: particular funding programs; aspects of the development, dissemination, tracking and evaluation of equity resources; and how current uptake and implementation levels could be improved.

Responses were once more streamlined, and the key factors informing the report were identified. Key enablers of equity resource uptake and implementation were grouped around four main areas: funding models and policies; accessibility and pricing; resource development issues; and organisational support and professional development issues.

Limitations of the study

A number of factors impacted on the content and findings of this report.

✧ The part-time, casual nature of many practitioners' employment and holiday periods meant that practitioner groups were difficult to coordinate and feedback was difficult to obtain. This led to practitioner views being less strongly represented in the report than had been hoped.

✧ In many cases, neither industry teachers or trainers nor specialist support teachers appeared to be significantly aware of, or were using, equity resources to support their training and assessment. The original intention of selecting a limited number of frequently nominated 'effective equity resources' for closer examination was, therefore, abandoned.

✧ Responses at organisational levels above practitioner level tended to focus heavily on issues related to the pre-and post-development phases of the resource development process.

As a result, the focus of both the research and the report necessarily shifted to issues in the pre-and post-development stages of equity resource creation—those felt to impact significantly on uptake and implementation. Issues in the production stage are less strongly represented as they were not perceived by the majority of respondents to be the crucial issues. While this has resulted in individual resources being less prominent in the report, it has also led to a focus on issues which have been less extensively represented in the literature to date.

Structure of the report

In accordance with the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) guidelines, this report consists of two main documents:

✧ a report containing:
  ♦ an overview of the project purpose and methodology
  ♦ background to the research
  ♦ main findings
  ♦ references

✧ supporting documents which include:
  ♦ stakeholder consultation list
  ♦ questionnaires.

Research background

Although participation rates in vocational education and training have increased for many equity groups, participation rates and outcomes for some groups remain significantly below the national average (ANTA 2000c, 2000e). *Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training 2004–2010* (ANTA 2000a) identifies the need for 'concerted action to improve access, participation and outcomes' (p.11) for 'people facing barriers to learning due to disability, age, gender, cultural difference, language, literacy, numeracy, cost, unemployment, imprisonment or isolation' (p.4). The *2004–2010 National strategy* builds on earlier initiatives and strategies aimed at achieving equality of participation and achievement generally (ANTA 1998), in particular in the area of disabilities (ANTA 2000d, 2000e) and Indigenous training (ANTA 2000b, 2000c).

Changes to the Australian Quality Training Framework from July 2005 have attempted to promote these goals by further embedding 'equity into the core business of vocational education and training' (ANTA 2000a, p.4). A number of subsequent national (Robertson et al. 2004a, 2004b, 2004c) and state (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2004; Queensland Department of Employment and Training 2002; Western Australian Department of Education and Training 2005a) resources offer assistance and support to registered training organisations in

meeting their obligations under Standard 6 (Access and equity and client service) and Standards 8 and 9 (Assessment; Learning and assessment strategies) of the Australian Quality Training Framework, as well as in enhancing their understanding of 'equity issues in relation to compliance with other standards' (Robertson et al. 2004a, p.5).

The focus on compliance with the Australian Quality Training Framework—the 'stick' of VET equity—has been accompanied by a strong emphasis on the positive business and organisational benefits of responding to the diversity of Australia's learners and learner needs—the 'carrot' of VET equity. For training providers, the potential benefits of working positively with diversity include capturing a greater share of the training market and creating a competitive advantage, as well as meeting legal obligations and more effectively managing risk (Robertson et al. 2004a, p.12). Underpinning this promotion of the business benefits of a more integrated, flexible and responsive approach to equity issues in training and assessment is a model of 'productive diversity' which highlights the social, legal, organisational, market and financial benefits of effective diversity management for both individual businesses and for Australia's longer-term competitive advantage (Bean reproduced in Robertson et al. 2004a, p.11). This approach to diversity management has recently received more concrete national endorsement in the publication of a series of 'managing cultural diversity resource guides' for the VET, higher education and schools sectors recently commissioned by NCVER as part of the present project suite (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2005).

Skills shortages created by the ageing of the workforce and the undersupply of new labour, and skills gaps created by vastly changed work practices have also resulted in a re-assessment by many industries of the need to value Australia's cultural diversity and to provide appropriate and accessible training opportunities for all. Industry skills councils' publications increasingly reflect a concern to raise the profile of the 'hidden Australian workforce' with potential employers (Automotive Training Australia 2005, p.8), to maximise retraining opportunities for older existing workers, learners with disabilities or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council 2005), and to present a strong business case for recruiting and training 'people who have traditionally been underrepresented in areas of Australian working life' (TDT Australia 2005, p.2).

Policy and practice issues

Current approaches to access and equity aim for systemic change to the way training and employment organisations, and people at all levels within them, respond to the 'equity' challenge. The drive to embed access and equity within the core business of these organisations reflects an increased national commitment to a 'built in' rather than the prevailing essentially 'bolted on' model of equity provision (Bean 2004). To be effective, such change needs to be both sustainable and able to deliver the anticipated returns on investment for training organisations, workplaces and learners.

National and state equity resource development funding programs aim to translate national intentions into changed practices at all levels of teaching and learning and organisational and workplace practice by providing high-quality materials directly supporting the aims of the wider VET agenda. As with the tighter quality assurance framework surrounding registered training organisation obligations in relation to access and equity, many equity resources now undergo a quality assurance process, which results in national noting through the 'tick' logo on the National Training Information Service, clearly indicating their integration into training packages and wider VET priorities.

As with anything of this nature, the production of equity resources, no matter how high their calibre, is no guarantee of their uptake and implementation. As one industry representative and resource developer commented:

> A well-designed and presented resource is an extraordinarily relevant aid to effective learning.
> But my shelves are full of things that have been developed and never implemented.

A considerable body of work exists on the impact of instructional design, attractiveness, ease of use, relevance and appropriateness of content and language for specific target groups. Recently produced guidelines (Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2003; Queensland Department of Employment and Training 2005) continue to assist resource developers with the design and presentation aspects of resource development. Extensive showcasing of good-practice initiatives (McDonald et al. 2005; McKenna 2004; Victorian Office of Training 2004) and the characteristics of good practice encourage teachers and trainers to adopt more flexible and innovative approaches to cultural diversity issues in training by modelling success. Emerging adaptive technologies such as speech recognition are increasingly available to assist learners to access educational materials, including VET equity resources (Paez, Wilkes & Gurgone 2004).

However, many of the wider factors contributing to the uptake and implementation of equity resources (and training and assessment resources in general) appear to have been substantially overlooked. These include marketing factors related to the visibility and accessibility of resources and tracking, and evaluation factors related to the continued relevance of resources. They also include people management factors related to the systematic building of organisational capacity not only to implement, but also to sustain changed practices. Organisational factors such as organisational direction and leadership and knowledge-sharing across different organisational layers are currently being investigated in complementary NCVER research (Figgis et al. in progress). The degree to which ongoing support of teachers and trainers significantly affects their ability to take on new challenges in VET equity provision has also been the subject of detailed investigation (Clayton & Blom 2003).

To be effective, equity resource funding needs to recognise and work within this wider framework of factors contributing to uptake and implementation. Failing to do this may mean that returns on investment of public money in resource development are low and that no sustainable business case can be made for continuing to develop them. In the longer term, improving these returns on investment may involve changing resource development funding models and policies to include researched and financially sustainable dissemination, marketing, tracking and evaluation strategies as part of the application process.

Although it is clear that '*product' resources* (print, multimedia, online) can only ever constitute a single part of any overall strategy to address cultural diversity issues in VET training and assessment, acknowledging the wider framework and organisational context of equity resource development, implementation and uptake may also involve a renewed focus on the role of '*people' resources* (Clayton & Blom 2003) within organisations trying to achieve, replicate and sustain change. As one sceptical VET teacher put it, 'the answer may not be a resource … or an expanded library. It may be better skills and strategies and, where I come from, that means people!'

Issues related to the uptake and implementation of equity resources have substantial potential implications for major stakeholders in the equity resource development process, particularly for funding bodies, registered training organisations and industry skills councils, and may require a considerable rethinking of the resource development process. In the final analysis, it is the benefits to VET learners which must remain the focal point of any debate.

Findings

Key limitations and enablers of the uptake and implementation of VET equity resources were grouped around four main, but interrelated areas: funding models and policies; accessibility and pricing; resource development; and organisational support and professional development issues.

Funding models and policies

Funding policies and guidelines set the framework for the development and implementation of VET equity resources. There was widespread comment, particularly from managers of the resource development process and developers themselves, that the current focus of funding policies and guidelines on the development phase severely restricted the uptake and implementation of high-quality VET equity resources. Four areas of concern were identified by the research:

✧ funding cycles and budgets

✧ proposal scoping and potential duplication of existing resources

✧ marketing and dissemination strategies

✧ quality assurance and evaluation strategies.

Funding cycles and budgets

Funding for VET equity resource development is currently almost universally limited to a 12-month cycle, thus effectively encouraging a constant turnover of volume rather than a focus on implementation and continuous improvement. The following comments were typical from respondents:

> Funding seems to be project-oriented and disjointed, it leads to a 'done that—let's move on' mentality, chasing the next funding round, the new and different before being able to get all the value from the one just finished, or evaluating what we can learn from this one to apply to the next. (Program manager)

> I'd rather see fewer, but better quality resources developed, and some money going to updating and promoting good resources that are gathering dust.
> (Industry skills council officer)

Resource developers stressed the time involved in different stages of resource development. For example, multimedia electronic resources required time-consuming coordination, trialling, user testing and troubleshooting. Considerable lead time is involved in establishing and coordinating steering committees and reference groups to ensure appropriate industry and multidisciplinary input. Some noted that obtaining free and knowledgeable industry expertise was becoming increasingly problematic. When project timelines slipped due to unforeseen problems, trialling, consultation and incorporation of feedback were the likely casualties because of the time commitment involved. As an experienced product developer observed:

> The funding and the time-frame are invariably too tight, because it is difficult to get an accurate estimate if the costing is not adequately researched. Usually it is done at management rather than a technical level, and the complexity of what is involved is not apparent. Bilingual

input, or having professional actors, or getting access to a representative range of workplaces and industry expertise—all these things often take more time and money to get than initially planned. Trying to get it all done in 12 months invariably means quality is compromised or budgets are overblown, or both!

The short-term nature of the funding cycle and its focus on development alone means there is little incentive for funding applicants to build post-production strategies, such as professional development, implementation, marketing and ongoing evaluation into their proposals.

This also contributes to duplication of resources, since many excellent resources capable of revision or customisation remain unknown and unused. A 12-month funding cycle also means that longer-term performance measures, such as improvements in VET access, retention rates and outcomes as a result of implementing the resource, are impossible to track.

A number of respondents suggested a two-to-three-year funding cycle, or a staged funding process which ensured the product developed had a 'life span of five years'. They argued that this would allow resource developers to establish processes to ensure that the product was widely promoted, used and evaluated against identified benchmarks, with a view to updating and modification where the resource was considered to have ongoing usefulness. Some suggested that linking resource development cycles to existing major cycles such as five-yearly training package reviews was the most strategic way of helping to promote uptake, ensure appropriate levels of evaluation, and minimise wastage of high-quality resources.

Project scoping and duplication of existing resources

The ongoing development of substantially similar resources was consistently identified as a significant issue. As well as the wastage of public monies involved, such duplication was also considered to be a factor contributing to practitioner confusion and information overload. The following contributing factors were identified.

Funding requirements

While many funding guidelines require applicants to show a 'need' for the resource, relatively few actively require applicants to demonstrate that they are not duplicating existing resources.

> The 2005–06 Workplace English Language and Literacy program guidelines state that the resource funded must not result in duplication (S1.9), must provide a limited list of websites where 'information about existing resources is available' (S1.14) and require applicants to establish if any similar resources exist.

The indication of the 'need' for a resource is often constrained by the necessity of limiting applications to a specified small number of pages. The 2005 Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Adult Literacy Innovative Projects Funding application form, for example, contains ten sections to be addressed in a total of three pages. On the whole, resource development managers did not perceive the requirement to show need as involving the same level of accountability as the requirement to show lack of duplication. 'Need' was considered to involve more of a prima facie case, as long as industry support for it could also be shown, whereas 'duplication' involved a more intensive investigative process, including extensive web searches, and industry and interstate consultations. This perceived distinction was exacerbated by a lack of funding to pursue adequate scoping.

Several instances were reported by managers who had begun resource development after putting 'as much time and effort into searches for existing material as we could reasonably afford', only to find well into the project that similar resources existed, or were being developed.

Of particular concern was the listing of resources being developed, resources which were felt to be almost impossible to track down. Some respondents cited NCVER's listing of research in progress as a good model for other funding bodies. However, once again, such listing needed to be more centralised and visible, since developers did not have the time or expertise to search innumerable databases. The multiplicity of funding sources was also seen as a further problem in knowing what was being developed and by whom.

Most respondents indicated support for a more stringent requirement for a comprehensive scoping process which actively demonstrated lack of duplication, as well as providing realistic time frames and budgets. However, they also pointed out the resource implications of such a move.

> The New South Wales Department of Education and Training's Industry Skills Program requires funding applicants to show need, support and relevance (Section 4). Applications are tied to identified skills shortages and unmet training needs and require letters from industry skills councils and other organisations 'clearly indicating that, after investigation, no project of a similar nature or the development of resources for the same competency standards has been/is currently being undertaken or is likely to be undertaken in the near future'.

Assessment of applications

The capacity of the funding body to carry out careful checks of information provided by applicants was mentioned by many respondents as a factor in the continued duplication or near-duplication of resources. Limited resources (or expertise) for this assessment stage meant that some funders relied almost entirely on the honesty and knowledge of the applicants and the prima facie strength of their case. Others conducted web searches themselves but stressed that this was only to the extent that time, resources and their own knowledge base allowed. Funders were also aware that many existing resources would simply not be publicly listed. Some relied on the pooled knowledge of a panel of industry, peak body and interstate representatives to assess the claims of applicants more thoroughly.

Suggestions for improving the assessment process included:

✧ listing websites, which the applicant was obliged to show they had consulted on the application form

✧ requiring applicants to detail websites, organisations and people they had consulted in an appendix to the application

✧ initiating a two-stage assessment process which would require a preliminary needs analysis or a 'shortlisting' of applicants to be interviewed by panel members

✧ ensuring that assessment panels were sufficiently representative and up to date to allow checks across states and major providers/resource developers.

> The National New Practices in Flexible Learning project funded under the Australian Flexible Learning Framework facilitates the development and trialling of new concepts in flexible learning. The guidelines for the project require applicants to show the research they have undertaken to support their concept and why and how their project differs from existing resources or approaches. Applications pass through a three-stage process of review: by a panel consisting of representatives of all states and territories and key stakeholders; by written application and an interview; and by the submission of a five-minute audiotape summarising how the proposal meets the selection criteria.

Territoriality and copyright

There was widespread comment on the 'silo mentality' of training providers, state training authorities, or sections within them and, in some cases, industry bodies. This was thought partly to reflect a basic tension between the exhortation to collaborate and the requirement to run competitively as a business. Quality resources were, in many cases, not shared because organisations saw no need or were inadequately resourced to do so, or as one program manager put it, because of 'preciousness over who's developed what, and sensitivity to possible criticism'.

In some cases, effective mechanisms for disseminating information internally (within larger organisations) and externally (across providers, states, industries and peak bodies) did not exist. Where they did, organisational personnel were often not skilled or resourced to systematically carry out this function. Under these circumstances, it was extremely difficult for either funding applicants or funding bodies to get a clear picture of existing resources. This was thought to be particularly so since the demise of the National Clearinghouse which formerly functioned as a centralised repository for many education and training reosurces.

Copyright issues were repeatedly raised in relation to the duplication of existing resources, due to the lack of clarity of contracts and guidelines or confusion over the relevant body or person from whom permission could be sought.

While acknowledging some recent improvements in this area, product development managers stressed that confusion over copyright of resources developed several years ago and disputes over state-funded resources meant that funding applicants were often more likely to take 'the safest route' and start from scratch rather than attempting to work out which material could and could not be customised, and applying for permission to do so. Others also noted the timelag between completion and availability, citing examples of resources that were never finalised and published.

Suggestions for improving the information-sharing process included:

✧ more formalised interstate and national coordination of product development

✧ mandatory listing of all resources developed or in the process of development with public money on specified sites

✧ clear and preferably unrestricted copyright conditions that allow for customisation and updating of publicly funded resources.

Marketing and dissemination strategies

The lack of systematic marketing and dissemination of equity resources was identified as a significant area of concern by respondents, with the majority of managers identifying this as their top or second priority area for improvements (Question 10, Managers' Focus Questions).

> If there's an identified need for a resource, and public money has been spent on developing it, you'd think it'd be logical for it to be properly disseminated but, so often, it's impossible to find out how to get it when you manage to discover it exists.   (Industry training provider)

Many considered that resources were poorly showcased at national and state levels, and that this lack of a systematic, strategic approach to maximising the visibility and accessibility of new products to potential users reflected a prevailing attitude to equity resource development.

For product developers, the lack of effective dissemination and implementation was particularly disheartening, with one manager calling it the 'never again syndrome', where teachers involved in projects were so disillusioned with the promotion and implementation of the resources they had developed, they would never volunteer to take part in such projects again. Another experienced product developer commented that she learnt to critically examine project proposals and budgets before becoming committed to the project, 'otherwise it becomes a waste of a year of your life!'

> I think they think—well, if the product's good, it'll somehow sell itself, you know—sort of by magic. If it doesn't get used, then it's easy to say the product's no good. That way you don't have to look at the other things, like how many people knew about it and how they would even find out! Just stick it on a website or two and if they want it badly enough, they'll find it!
>
> (Resource developer)

In relation to funding policies and guidelines, the following issues were identified.

Project scoping

As with the requirement to show lack of duplication, relatively few funding guidelines require applicants to provide a costed dissemination and marketing strategy. Where this is required, as in the ANTA Adult Literacy Innovative Projects (S.10h), there is usually no onus to show how the strategy will be funded, executed and maintained. Applicants often respond in highly general terms, reflecting the lack of focus on this area in the guidelines themselves and, in some cases, their own limitations.

When specifically questioned, many developers favoured the inclusion of a requirement for a comprehensive dissemination strategy, commenting that this would assist them with planning for the longer term, and clearly identifying responsibilities and associated costings for the post-production phases. Some suggested that partnership arrangements or industry in-kind contributions might be sought to resource or support the marketing and dissemination phase.

Organisational responsibilities, capacity and expertise

While some developers considered they had the capacity to undertake marketing and dissemination, particularly in specialist areas, most did not.

For example, some resource developers in training organisations felt they lacked both the marketing expertise and resourcing levels to systematically and continuously market the resources they produced. This meant that their promotion and marketing of resources was predominantly 'hit and miss' and subsequently reactive (responding to enquiries and requests) after the initial free distribution was over. Developers were also often unaware of strategic ways/sites to promote and sell their resources, particularly if they were not closely aligned with the industry or target audience.

> We used to have a dedicated publications person. At least then, we could be a bit more proactive in targeting people or organisations who might be interested in the resources. Now, we just rely on whatever enquiries we get as a result of word-of-mouth or people coming across things at conferences or on websites. We don't even track how people got to find out about them so we're often none the wiser the next time round. It's depressing really. What's the point of all these resources if people out there don't know about them?
>
> (Resource development manager, registered training organisation)

Increasingly, funding bodies are taking responsibility for marketing resources or requiring resource developers to lodge the resource with a central distributor such as Australian Training Products for nationally funded projects, or the Queensland Centre for Training Materials or the NSW Skillsonline, for state-funded projects. However, a number of specialist providers or industry associations, on the other hand, considered that they were best placed to market and promote resources because of their knowledge and their regular interaction with potential users, and their ability to add value through professional development and ongoing support.

Strategic placement of resources was thought to be crucial in effective marketing and uptake, and many were critical of 'one size fits all' and 'one-stop shop' approaches (see more detailed treatment later in this chapter).

Respondents at all levels of the resource development process felt that funding policies and guidelines should specify and require a more coordinated approach to marketing and dissemination, one that identified the costs and responsibilities of parties involved.

Quality assurance and evaluation strategies

Most funding policies and guidelines reviewed for this study specified methodological requirements, such as industry input, multidisciplinary teams, trialling or piloting of the resource as part of its development, as a validation and quality assurance strategy.

However, as mentioned earlier, the funding time frames and budgets were often too tight to accommodate extensive or meaningful trialling, especially when access to industry expertise or workplaces was problematic.

A number of funding bodies have also prescribed particular quality frameworks for resource developers that have greatly enhanced the useability of VET equity resources. These have included the national noting process, whereby resources must meet the five National Training Quality Council quality principles and the guidelines set by the Flexible Learning Framework for online and distance materials. This results in the resource being noted on the National Training Information System as support materials for the relevant training package(s).

> The New South Wales Department of Education and Training's Enterprise Training Program currently requires applicants to specify 'the number of employees to pilot the training materials … and the functional areas they work in within the enterprise' (S.C5).
>
> Workplace English Language and Literacy program funding applications specifically fund the 'development and trialling of training materials designed to enhance language, literacy and numeracy skills and be aligned with endorsed training packages' (S1.10 2005–06 guidelines) and require applicants to show 'the results of resource trialling' as part of the final report (S.13).
>
> Both funding bodies require resources developed to meet the National Training Quality Council's quality principles to be noted on National Training Information Service.

Respondents commented favourably on the value of such frameworks in improving the quality of the completed resources and ensuring that equity resources are integrated into the wider VET policy context and more widely accessed.

> The noting QA process forces another scan of what's been developed, avoids groupthink and adds value. We've found it very useful, and it means the product is more marketable because it shows that the resource is a quality product. (Industry skills council CEO)

Other funding bodies have developed specific checklists and guidelines for developers to adopt as a strategy for enhancing the accessibility and user-friendliness of resources. Examples of these include the Australian Flexible Learning Framework's Everyone Online check sheets for Access and Equity in Online Learning, and the Developing Accessible Learning Resources guidelines developed by the Queensland Department of Employment and Training which incorporate universal design[1] principles.

However, one of the recurring criticisms from respondents was that very few funding bodies required applicants to demonstrate post-production tracking or evaluation of the resources developed. Resource development managers and funding bodies often have limited knowledge about how resources have been used, by whom and how effective they have been in addressing the needs of target groups or implementing national policy. In many cases, developers simply lose sight of the resources once the product itself and the initial distribution are completed.

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[1] … the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design (Mace n.d.).

The absence of any requirements for systematically monitoring or evaluating implementation or uptake means that few organisations or funding bodies develop evaluation strategies that might potentially enable them to review and update existing resources or assess the need for improvements in their approaches.

However, while they were aware of its benefits in terms of planning and feedback, resource developers pointed out that current models did not enable them to build in qualitative or quantitative measures they might use for evaluative purposes. There was widespread recognition of the difficulties involved in attributing quantitative outcomes, such as improved VET enrolment, retention or completion rates, solely to the use of particular resources. Distribution, sales and website hits were also considered to be unreliable indicators, since many organisations routinely bought resources which went no further than libraries or management desks. Where resources were not adequately annotated in catalogues or in online listings, potential users were often buying sight unseen and could not be presumed to be implementing these resources. Similarly, the more subjective nature of qualitative responses was thought to be insufficient if not balanced by more objective measures.

A minority of developers attached evaluation sheets to their resources on distribution but did not have the time or resources to pursue unreturned surveys. Feedback in most cases remained ad hoc.

> We do our best to get a picture of how effective the resource is but it's just as the opportunity arises. We get bits and pieces of anecdotal feedback from talking to staff at meetings or conferences or organisational events. People are too busy to fill in surveys and let's face it, if the organisation doesn't value something, why should the staff?
>
> (Program manager, registered training organisation)

Unless funding could be generated by other means, for example, systematic evaluation of resources commissioned by a funding body or small sales profits, post-product evaluation was not financially feasible.

Suggestions for improving quality assurance and evaluation practices included:

✧ negotiating qualitative and quantitative criteria against which the particular resource was to be evaluated within the framework of funding and reporting

✧ identifying how the evaluation was to be funded within the framework of funding and reporting

✧ requesting 'statements of commitment' from funded organisations, including a commitment to act on the findings of any evaluation undertaken

✧ linking the expiry date of a particular resource to the review date of the training package it supports, so that evaluation and review is built in to its development and life cycle

✧ sending targeted surveys to organisations, which have purchased resources, to seek feedback.

Accessibility and pricing

One of the key findings from this study relates to many respondents' lack of awareness of the resources and databases that were highly relevant to their work. Once aware of particular resources and websites, they were keen to access them. The main factors impeding greater accessibility of VET equity resources were identified as:

✧ the lack of systematic recording of information about resources

✧ the lack of strategic dissemination points

✧ the costs of maintaining databases

✧ the pricing of resources.

Systematic recording of information about resources

While programs such as the Workplace English Language and Literacy program now require developers to submit a proforma giving a brief outline of the resource, its intended audience and relationship to training packages, there appears to be no across-the-board requirement for publicly funded resources to contain such descriptors or be centrally lodged with either a specialist or general database. This means that both completed resources and those in development are often difficult to locate if potential users do not know where to look in the first place and can easily be missed as users tire of searching.

Respondents who commented on this aspect of the funding process suggested that all successful funding applicants for federal or state grants should be required to complete and forward a standardised form briefly annotating the resource as part of the final report. The onus would then lie with the funding body to upload the information onto the identified distribution site, and encourage the same information to be duplicated or hyperlinked to specialist sites. It was suggested that resources produced 'internally' by publicly funded training organisations such as technical and further education (TAFE) institutes should also be more widely accessible.

A related issue concerned the amount of information available about a particular resource to enable potential users to make an informed decision. Practitioners pointed out that they were often buying 'sight unseen', and that brief annotations were not sufficient to provide them with an understanding of the relevance of the resource to their target audience, or how it could be obtained.

> Resources listed on the Australian Training Products website include brief descriptions of the format and content of the resource; the units of competence, the training package and qualifications it supports; information on copyright and licensing issues; as well as links to related products by National Training Information Service code and training package. The website also includes a sample of the resource, such as an extract or a copy of one of the learner guides, and for a number of resources, a brief review by a practitioner and an evaluation based on a five star rating. It also invites feedback from users.

Strategic dissemination points

Developers were quick to acknowledge the 'hit and miss' nature of their dissemination strategies but often saw this as unavoidable, given their skills and resourcing levels. These strategies were often short-term and limited to the immediate post-production period, with knowledge of the resource passed by word of mouth after this period, and few long-term strategies being employed. Common short-term strategies included: issuing free copies; relying on steering committee and reference group members to promote products; organising launches where possible; showcasing at conferences and road shows; emailing; and presenting to practitioner networks and professional development events. Less commonly adopted strategies included: ensuring that information about new resources appeared in targeted industry and organisational newsletters; listing in organisational catalogues; enlisting the support of 'champions', for example, peak bodies to promote the uptake of resources at professional networks and conferences; identifying and targeting relevant websites; and forwarding annotated descriptions of the resource for listing.

Both developers and practitioners commented that resources, especially 'freebies', were often disseminated to people at high-to-middle management levels within organisations. Such people were often too busy to pass on the resources themselves or information about the resources to those 'closer to the ground'. In addition, managers in larger organisations did not see the promotion or distribution of resources as part of their organisational role and, in many cases, were unaware of the appropriate people to receive them. Resources, therefore, often remained 'gathering dust in drawers and on shelves' unseen by their intended audiences.

Resources were also often sent to organisational libraries as a matter of course. Although this in theory gave them wide accessibility, practitioners commented that they would 'only get used if you knew they were there in the first place'.

Responses to Question 9 (Managers' Focus questions) indicated that many resource development managers and industry representatives were unfamiliar with the range of websites potentially useful in checking for VET equity resources. Although sites such as Australian Training Products and National Training Information Service were well known, others such as AEShareNet, Resource Generator, ARIS (language and literacy, including Workplace English Language and Literacy program resources), Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET), Billabong (Indigenous), as well as sites hosted by the state training authorities, appeared to be less well known.

Many expressed high levels of frustration when attempting to locate specific information within a reasonable time frame and found the navigation of sites such as AEShareNet, Resource Generator and National Training Information Service difficult and time-consuming. This sometimes led to reluctance to consult databases at all.

> Really, with a lot of these sites, you have to know exactly what you're looking for before you can find it. If you already know the name of a resource, you'll probably be OK, but if you're trawling generally for resources in a particular area, you'll be there for a *long* time. It's quicker—and sometimes safer too—to just check with colleagues or ask around at meetings or conferences. (Program manager, registered training organisation)

Similarly, practitioner responses to Question 4 indicated that most were unfamiliar with national databases in general. Some were familiar with a limited range of databases relating to their immediate area of expertise (language and literacy, disabilities, Indigenous, industry-specific and professional association websites). There was a widespread perception that locating VET training resources was not their job—it was the role of training coordinators, managers, head teachers and those generally above them in the organisational hierarchy who were responsible for providing the necessary teaching and learning resources. As with managers, practitioners felt daunted by the difficult and time-consuming task of finding resources on the net.

Practitioners, in particular, expressed doubts about the usefulness of websites in increasing the visibility or accessibility of equity resources at all.

> Websites don't disseminate information. They don't tell you what a resource is like—how it will help you be a better trainer, how other people have used it and how it went. You can't flip through it and ask other people what they think. The only way to do that is through people. It's people who have to get the word out, not machines.

Both developers and practitioners commented negatively on the multiplicity of databases which might potentially need to be searched to locate new or existing training resources and the difficulty of using them.

> I wouldn't know where to start. I've got time for about five clicks and that's it. If I can't find what I'm after by then, I give it away. If you want people to use what's out there, they've got to be able to get to it easily. I don't really see it as my problem. (Practitioner)

The one-stop shop or multiple sites

In line with recommendations arising from the 2004 high level review of training packages, in October 2005 ministers for VET agreed to establish a new ministerial company to provide an integrated online 'one-stop shop' by combining Australian Training Products and AEShareNet. From early 2006 users will be able to identify and acquire training materials and make copyright arrangements for all publicly funded education and training resources. Australian Training Products has already taken responsibility for distributing the Victorian flexible learning materials previously distributed through TAFE Frontiers and has developed joint arrangements with the Western

Australian Westone materials, and is in the process of establishing physical viewing and distribution sites in a number of states such as South Australia and Western Australia.

Although welcoming this streamlining of the process for locating VET equity resources and acknowledging the potential for increasing their visibility and accessibility, many respondents expressed reservations.

The main reservation was that such a mega site would be complex to use. In the current climate of information overload, user readiness to accept information presented 'in bulk' was strongly questioned.

> How will that really help? We're already overloaded with information, we don't have the time and we can't easily find what we want using the smaller databases. Some sort of mega-database that mixes up training packages with resources just means that, instead of being overloaded, we'll be swamped! (Practitioner)

Secondly, where equity resources had adopted an inclusive, built-in approach, resources may not be easily tracked, especially if they addressed generic skills rather than specific training package units or qualifications.

Many respondents also considered that a one-stop shop could remove any sense of ownership on the part of the developers, resulting in correspondingly less attention to promotion, dissemination and marketing. Other respondents expressed scepticism over the capacity of any kind of central warehousing to promote a resource as efficiently as a specialised industry body. The example of the former National Clearinghouse was negatively cited a number of times in relation to this. Some also pointed to the increased pricing of equity resources by Australian Training Products as an argument for retaining a degree of competition.

Unless financial arrangements specifically addressed this issue, any small sales profits currently made by developer organisations would also be forfeited. The combined effect might be to reduce the incentive to undertake resource development at all. Other financial considerations are discussed later in this report.

Many resource development managers and non-teaching personnel saw the individual industry skills councils as the natural repository of VET equity resources, as they formed a vital link between industry and training organisations, reflecting the 'built in' approach of integrating equity. In this way, all resources related to a particular industry area and supporting particular training packages would be visible at, and purchasable from, a single site. Related generic resources or useful resources from other industry areas could be accessed via hyperlinks. Some made a clear distinction between the desirability of multiple 'discovery' sites, but only one or two 'distribution' sites.

An acknowledged drawback to this approach was that many industry skills councils currently do not list equity resources, including those directly supporting their own training packages, other than those they have developed. Supporters of the industry skills councils as one-stop shop hosts recognised that, since these organisations are required to operate on a business footing, financial incentives would need to be provided for them to promote and sell resources developed by other organisations.

Some industry skills councils expressed reservations about marketing resources they had not developed. However, since they or their state counterparts very often have representatives on steering committees or reference groups during the development phase of such resources, the suggestion was made that industry skills councils might use a system similar to the National Training Quality Council noting process to show their endorsement of products produced by other organisations.

Alternative arrangements suggested by respondents included:

✧ links between informational 'discovery' sites and sites of the developers or Australian Training Products for purchasing

✧ collation of training resource information on current multiple specialist sites into a single specialist site for each area (for example, Indigenous, language and literacy, disabilities, youth at risk) and promotion of these sites

✧ more effective promotion of existing sites, both general and specialist, and better electronic linkages between them.

Maintenance of databases

Both practitioners and developers commented that many VET equity databases were poorly maintained, difficult to get around and out of date. Many also lacked links to related relevant sites. This was often seen as a result of inadequate resourcing to maintain the sites, including lack of skilled personnel dedicated to the task of reviewing and improving the site. In some cases, organisations did not view maintenance or expansion of training resource information on their sites as integral to their core business, particularly where there was little financial return from resource sales.

Respondents who supported the role of databases in increasing the visibility and accessibility of VET equity resources stressed that any databases, whether one-stop shop or multiple, needed an active ongoing commitment to high levels of resourcing, which needed to include funds for the extensive promotion of the site to different levels of user.

As indicated above, the lack of systematic recording of information on resources meant that databases were also felt to be only as good as the information which was forwarded to them.

> It is ludicrous to expect databases to have all the latest information on them if nobody is required to provide that information in the first place. You can't expect database people to go out and find it—there has to be a system for making sure they get it.   (Program manager)

Respondents favouring the retention of a greater number of smaller databases also acknowledged that maintaining multiple smaller websites was an issue in terms of ongoing cost and resourcing requirements. They noted the loss of significant services provided by organisations such as the Adult (Literacy and Basic) Education Resource and Information Service (ARIS) since funding cuts had brought an end to regular publications and professional development activities linked to resources.

The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) was initially established with Department of Education, Science and Training funding and has been operating for about two years. The website has no ongoing government funding and has introduced subscriptions in order to fund maintenance and development of the site. The site information was originally restricted to subscribers; however, an analysis of usage clearly showed that 80% of users went no further than the page asking them to register. The information has now been made accessible to all users and an optional subscription entitles subscribers to a monthly newsletter. Subscriptions currently amount to less than half the amount needed to adequately maintain the site, which faces an uncertain future from the end of 2006.

Pricing of resources

Many developers and practitioners commented on the discriminatory and inconsistent pricing of resources as being one of the primary contributing factors to their poor uptake.

At present, developing organisations are encouraged by government funding bodies to distribute a small number of copies of their resources free of charge or sell them on a cost-recovery basis. These same resources are also often sold through Australian Training Products, which operates on a not-for-profit basis. Several instances were cited in which there was a very substantial price difference between the price charged by the developing organisation and the significantly higher price charged by Australian Training Products. Although developers realised that, in theory, the lower prices charged should result in improved sales for them, they also felt that Australian Training Products's high pricing of resources resulted in the product generally being regarded as too expensive and had a negative impact on sales overall.

Developers and practitioners pointed out that, regardless of differences between marketing organisations, pricing of equity resources needed to be kept low to encourage their uptake. The high pricing of resources was frequently mentioned by practitioners, particularly those in rural or remote areas whose access to pre-purchase viewing resource was limited.

> A resource at twenty dollars? OK, you can afford to make a mistake. But when you're looking at eighty or ninety dollars—and that's not unusual for resources that come with CD-ROMs— nobody wants to order on spec. It's not as if we have huge budgets for buying resources.
>
> (Practitioner, registered training organisation)

Practitioners, in particular, suggested the need for a far greater level of annotation of resources in catalogues and on the net. They also suggested having contents pages and sample pages accessible online, as well as sample CD-ROMs as 'tasters'. This would enable them to get a better feel for the content and quality of the resource and was more likely to lead to purchase.

Resource development

Although generally a high level of satisfaction was expressed with the quality and appropriateness of recent equity resources, several aspects of the planning and design phases elicited a wide range of comments, the majority of which came from those in policy or advisory positions and resource development managers who saw these issues as central to the uptake and implementation of resources. Comment on these issues at practitioner level was rare. Three areas of planning and design were specifically identified:

✧ links to strategic external drivers

✧ accessibility for all rather than targeting for the few

✧ industry leadership and multidisciplinary input.

Links to strategic external drivers

The uptake of equity resources was considered to be more likely to occur where the development of the resource was linked to an external driver or imperative of some kind. Four major types of external links were identified.

Links to economic and business outcomes

Some respondents in policy and advisory positions stressed the need to move away from the view of equity as a social agenda towards a view which focused on the economic, organisational and social value of having as many people as possible participating in training and working, in other words, the business case. As one of them observed:

> We've had the bleeding hearts and the moral high ground, and I think now we're in the 'do it or else' phase, which can really just reinforce the view that equity hurts. We need to move on … to think strategically about what all kinds of people have to offer and contribute, and how much can be gained, not lost, especially in a skills shortages economy. People need to see that it's in everyone's interests to have an equitable VET sector and to support everyone to get the kind of outcomes the VET sector can provide. (Program manager)

Establishing clear and visible links between training opportunities for all and industry-led agendas such as the identification of skills gaps and shortages under the National Industry Skills Initiative was thought to be far more useful in furthering the equity agenda than presenting this agenda either as a moral or a compliance issue.

> In the long-run, you're talking about employment not training, so it makes more sense to argue the case for equity not as 'equity', but in terms of business outcomes for enterprises and economic outcomes for particular sectors and for the country generally. That way you capitalise on the two bottom line drivers. (Industry skills council representative)

This approach was also felt to be a more accurate reflection of an integrated 'productive diversity' model, which seeks to embed access and equity into an organisation's core business and mainstream organisational processes in order to secure a raft of organisational benefits. These benefits include increased client satisfaction, organisational effectiveness and workplace morale which are measured according to practical, realistic performance indicators directly related to each business and management function (Bean in Robertson et al. 2004a, p.11).

Key success factors in placing and supporting New Apprentices in disabilities is a short pamphlet produced in 2003 by Greg Lewis of Edge Training Solutions in Western Australia. It presents the business case for and examples of collaborative partnerships between group training organisations and disability employment agencies. It provides practical tips and focuses on the 'excellent outcomes' that people with disabilities have with New Apprenticeships and employment.

All aboard: A national strategy for access and equity in the transport and logistics industry presents a clear business case for recruitment of 'people who have traditionally been underrepresented in areas of Australian working life' (TDT Australia 2005, p.2).

Identified skills shortages brought about by the ageing of the workforce combined with the difficulties of recruiting young people into the industry are the starting points of the strategy. The strategy perceives 'all workers as important and as providing valuable opportunities for the Transport and Logistics Industry' (p.3) and recognises the potential changes to attitudes, recruitment practices, job structures, and training opportunities which may be required to successfully implement the strategy.

Links to policy drivers

Equity resources that support the implementation of mandatory national or state standards or policies were particularly well received by key players in the VET sector, such as training package developers in registered training organisations and developers of learning and teaching resources. Examples included the Australian Quality Training Framework standards for registered training organisations, the National Training Quality Council's quality principles for noting of support materials, the more rigorous requirements of competency standards for trainers and assessors, and requirements under funding guidelines for state and national resource development programs.

For those who felt they were lacking in 'equity expertise', resources that translated policy or compliance requirements into practical applications were seen as particularly valuable.

Other external initiatives identified as potentially useful catalysts for equity resource development included the recent TAA04 Training and Assessment Package, the Flexible Learning Framework and state strategies targeting equity groups. Major recurring initiatives such as the five-yearly review of training packages and reviews of higher education were also mentioned as events at a national level to which equity resource development and funding might be strategically tied.

Fair go in training for people with a disability: Meeting your AQTF obligations was produced in 2002 by Helen Foley of the Queensland Department of Employment and Training.

It explains the requirements under the Australian Quality Training Framework standards, deals with issues such as reasonable adjustment, flexible support and training options available to registered training organisations. It also demystifies different types of disabilities and provides short case studies and practical tips.

In a recent survey of Queensland registered training organisations, over 75% nominated it as a 'good source of information about disability'. It has also informed the development of similar interstate resources, as well as the 2004 ANTA publication *Working with diversity: A guide to equity and the AQTF* (Robertson et al. 2004a). An interstate senior equity project officer, reflecting on its value stated:

> From the feedback I've had, *Fair go in training for people with a disability* has been brilliant and very user friendly for RTOs and regulators alike. I think it's because it demystifies both the AQTF and disabilities. Instead of just asking the questions of RTOs, it actually provides answers for them and in easy-to-read, plain-language format.

The 2004 ANTA publication *Working with diversity: A guide to equity and the AQTF* (Robertson et al. 2004a) is one of three booklets aimed to 'assist Registered Training Organisations and auditors to provide quality services to all learners, and meet their obligations under the AQTF' (p.iii). The resource is clearly linked to registered training organisations' compliance requirements with the Australian Quality Training Framework standards and the implementation of two national strategies in the VET sector: *Partners in a learning culture— Australia's national strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*, and *Bridging pathways—The national strategy for increasing opportunities for people with a disability* (ANTA 2000b, 2000d).

The resource is not a compliance document but 'focuses on how to better meet the needs of learners and on the continuous improvement aspect of the AQTF' (Robertson et al. 2004a, p.1) by summarising issues, asking key questions and using a case study, practical problem-solving approach. It provides links to a number of other resources and organisations which can provide specialist assistance.

Links to industry competency standards or industry regulatory requirements

Equity resources directly aligned to competency standards or produced to assist workplace personnel meet workplace regulatory requirements attached to licensing and occupational health and safety seemed more likely to be taken up by VET providers.

The direct alignment of equity resources to units of competence presents challenges when they only address part of the unit or underpinning knowledge and skills across a number of units rather than a whole unit. This is particularly difficult if the competency standards have not identified such skills in sufficient detail.

The other challenge for equity resource developers is the need to update resources as training packages are reviewed to ensure their continued relevance. Respondents observed that the linking of resources to the publication of new training packages greatly facilitated their promotion and uptake. Conversely, industry representatives and some resource developers cited resources that had not been updated and which tended to be automatically ignored, despite the quality and relevance of the product.

> *Using chemicals safely*, a video, learner and training manual, was produced in 2004 by ChemCert Australia (Vic.) Inc. and Swinburne University of Technology TAFE under Workplace English language and Literacy program funding to provide training in the safe use of chemicals in the rural, conservation, land management and horticulture industries. The resource was designed in response to new legislative requirements for entry-level employees (Australian Qualifications Framework [AQF] II) who use AgVet chemicals and prepares them for the ChemCert (AQF III) qualification.
>
> It addresses the competencies required for two units in the Rural and Conservation Training Package dealing with the different types of chemicals used in a range of rural and horticultural industries, their handling, transport, storage, risk control and application.
>
> It has been used in conjunction with ChemCert training, with over 2000 copies sold through ChemCert Australia (Vic.) Inc. since its completion.

Linking the production or implementation of equity resources to major national or state events was also cited as a successful strategy in promoting their uptake.

> *Winning ways: An Olympic customer service training tool* was developed by the NSW Transport and Distribution Industry Training Advisory Board (2000) to assist businesses in the transport, security and tourism and hospitality industries to meet the customer service demands of the 2000 Olympic Games.
>
> The resource (video and audiotape) focused on dealing positively with people from other cultures and language backgrounds, as well as people with disabilities, and was used both individually (taxi drivers listened to the tape) and with workplace trainers who used the video as a trigger. The resource was heavily promoted through industry associations and unions and reached an estimated 70 000 people working in organisation such as hotels, clubs, restaurants, cafes, and private and public transport companies. The training content contributed to outcomes across all three training packages in the areas of customer service skills, working with people with disabilities, and working in a socially diverse environment.

Accessibility for all rather than targeting for the few

There was significant comment from both practitioners and those at training coordinator or manager level on the packaging of equity resources. In the experience of many respondents, the presentation of resources as 'equity' resources targeted at particular learner groups had a number of significant drawbacks relating to their acceptability, applicability and accessibility.

Acceptability

VET resources that were not fully integrated into mainstream training were often seen as creating an additional workload instead of assisting trainers and assessors to accommodate the needs of particular groups. Some trainers and assessors were unsure of their skill levels in using resources of this type and were unlikely to use them even where they were known. Students also often perceived these resources as 'something extra you have to do' rather than as a potential means of improving their training outcomes, or they resented being stigmatised or singled out as having particular needs. These factors severely impacted on the uptake and implementation of equity resources.

Language, literacy and numeracy support resources appeared to be the focus of this type of comment. For learners from Indigenous communities, resources customised not only to Indigenous learners but to specific Indigenous communities across states and territories were generally considered appropriate. In relation to students with intellectual disabilities, respondents from the disabilities sector and from many training providers identified support *people* rather than resources as the crucial factor in achieving successful training outcomes.

Applicability

Except in larger training organisations with high enrolments, students requiring additional support were rarely able to be grouped together—nor was this seen as desirable. As a consequence, mainstream resources were considered a more suitable and practical way of providing training to these students.

> Some of the Koori resources, especially the CD-ROMs, are so effective that other kids want to use them too. They think they're just playing around but actually they're doing two things: they're learning about Koori culture which helps break down stereotypes, and they're also learning the content skills just like the Koori kids. So, a good resource can be used by a lot more people than you might think. (Aboriginal coordinator)

Associated with the mainstreaming of resources for logistical reasons were comments stressing the limited use made of resources seen to be targeted at particular trainee groups. People's perceptions of who the resource was for influenced their decisions about whether and how to use it, or even whether to look at it. This could impact negatively on the uptake of a particular resource and deprived both mainstream learners and learners from other target groups of the potential benefit of the resource.

There was general consensus that *all* training resources should be designed with maximum accessibility to *all* learner groups as a guiding developmental principle, especially at the lower qualification levels. Resources produced for distance learning were frequently cited as instances of good practice, since an integral part of the resource development methodology involved making the content clear and accessible to all potential users, including those with support needs. Resource developers stressed the importance of terminology used. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework, for example, has deliberately adopted an approach of 'everyone online', rather than one that separately identified and addressed access and equity considerations.

> The Australian Flexible Learning Framework and state government agencies such as Westone in Western Australia and the Queensland Department of Employment and Training require resource developers to apply Universal Design principles to ensure the resources produced are 'more usable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost'. They have developed guidelines and specifications to ensure that projects funded meet these requirements.

Aiming for maximum use of resources was also seen by some as an accountability issue in terms of public funding. Resource distributors such as Australian Training Products pointed out that some of their best sellers were resources funded through the Workplace English Language and Literacy program marketed as learner-friendly or practical learning resources rather than language and literacy support materials.

> *Seafood training—The first steps* is a CD-ROM developed for the Fishing Industries Training Board,
> Tasmania in 2001 to support learners at certificates I–IV level. The resource was developed with
> Workplace English Language and Literacy program funding but is marketed as 'a training resource for
> basic skills and knowledge in the seafood industry' rather than as a language and literacy support
> resource. The resource is easily navigable and covers the seafood industry core units in an interesting
> and accessible way. The seafood training resource is widely and successfully used by seafood industry
> training providers, with a range of users outside its target audience, including mainstream campus-based
> and non-campus-based trainees; as a taster in schools; with students with learning disabilities, limited
> language and literacy skills; and younger trainees.
>
>> We believe, that while it [*Seafood training—The first steps*] can be used with students with
>> language, literacy and numeracy needs, it isn't seen by others as a resource specifically designed
>> for that group. In fact, we would be very surprised to find that any trainees were actually aware
>> that it was developed for that group. Many trainers wouldn't be aware of it either. The only
>> comment we occasionally get from certificate IV users is that it is meant for people at a lower
>> qualification level.   (Chief executive officer, private seafood registered training organisation)

Accessibility

From a practical point of view, most industry representatives and VET providers consulted were
not familiar with 'equity' databases such as ARIS (language and literacy resources), ADCET
(disability resources) or Indigenous sites. Where they consulted websites, these were most likely to
be either mainstream training sites (National Training Information Service, ANTA, Department of
Education, Science and Training, technical and further education [TAFE] institutes, adult and
community education [ACE]), sites hosted by relevant government departments or institutions (for
example, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing site for Aged Care) or sites hosted
by specialist bodies relevant to their industry area (for example, dementia and Alzheimer sites for
aged care).

Since these sites rarely listed 'equity' or support resources however they were termed, users were
highly unlikely to encounter such resources at all. There was a strong suggestion that mainstreaming
equity resources would lead to their being listed by many more sites, thereby significantly improving
the likelihood of their uptake and implementation.

Industry leadership and multidisciplinary input

Consultations indicate that the quality and uptake of VET equity resources is significantly enhanced
by active industry input, ownership and support in promoting and endorsing the resource. While
most funding guidelines for the development of resources require industry support, managers and
product developers stressed the need for active involvement at a number of levels to ensure success.

> Resources must have industry ownership and respect. It's more than just awareness, it's about
> endorsement at a senior level, about having technical input during the development so that
> the content is accurate, about ensuring that the material is piloted with real people, that it
> reflects the industry, right down to the illustrations and photos used. Then, when it's finished,
> that industry actually promotes it.   (Equity program manager)

To achieve such outcomes usually requires a multidisciplinary team and a great deal of cooperation
and commitment from the parties involved. The role that industry plays in setting skill and
behavioural expectations of VET trainers and graduates, especially in relation to equity and
diversity issues, is key in setting the context for the status, demand and use of the resource.
Industry endorsement is critical to success.

In terms of product development, the requisite expertise included skills in project management,
instructional design, plain English, information technology, product development, educational

methodologies; understandings of the requirements of different learners; and industry expertise to evaluate both the content and approach. A number of respondents observed that they would prefer the development of fewer resources if this meant improvements in methodology and outcomes for those resources produced. Several illustrated this by citing instances of resources where the quality and ultimate usability was compromised by factors such as:

✧ insufficient needs analysis to establish resource requirements and likely audience for the product

✧ inaccurate industry content due to lack of technical feedback from frontline personnel

✧ lack of ownership and demand from industry for resources that seek to deliver more equitable skill outcomes and inclusive workplace cultures

✧ inappropriate complexity or amount of detail due to lack of piloting with learners and/or instructional design expertise

✧ technological requirements more sophisticated than those available in registered training organisations or the target learner group, or undetected technological 'bugs' as a result of inadequate third-party testing.

> The *Clean talking* video and learning resources were developed by Lynda Wyse & Associates (2004) under the Workplace English Language and Literacy program. *Clean talking* follows Tony on his first day as a cleaner and his supervisor Daisy, as they deal with various task and communication requirements.
>
> The resource relates to units in certificate II of the Asset Maintenance Training Package and has been noted as a supporting resource on the National Training Information Service. The Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council attributes the success of the resource to factors such as the instructional design framework, the testing of the material with 12 security training registered training organisations and the involvement of industry regulators, which meant the resource had industry ownership, awareness and credibility.

> *Deadly bay: Open for work* (TAFE NSW Access Division 2001) is a multimedia resource supporting young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve selected competencies from the Business Services, Horticulture, Community Recreation, Seafood, Hospitality and Tourism Training Packages.
>
> The success of the resource is attributed in large part to the close partnerships between language, literacy and numeracy consultants, multimedia writers and producers, registered training organisation staff and representatives from New South Wales Indigenous communities and organisations—from the conceptualisation stage through every subsequent stage of design and development.
>
> The resource is widely used as a taster in VET in Schools, in pre-vocational programs, and to support the delivery of Certificate II in Aboriginal Studies. It is currently being customised by the Centre for Learning and Innovation NSW for use with young Indigenous offenders.

Strong preferences were expressed for short, 'solution-focused' approaches in resources designed for practitioners and registered training organisations. Resources which adopted a theoretical, punitive or 'you're not good enough' approach were unlikely to be taken up. It was considered important that resources reflecting national policy were practical, user-friendly and directly related to the everyday issues and challenges faced by their target audience. A senior TAFE teacher trainer expressed it thus:

> In talking to other trainers and assessors, I've found that useful resources have to appeal to 'change-weary practitioners', who often have little time. So, resources must be in bite-size

chunks, which allow for dip in and out on a needs basis. They have to be practical, with not too much theory, and take account of the pressures trainers and assessors face.

VET practitioners also appreciated short, meaningful case studies that model good practice, such as the *Making the connections* (McKenna 2004) publication which showcases different Reframing the Future projects in short readable chunks, or videos showing how to work effectively with different equity groups, such as Indigenous students, or students with specific disabilities.

> The publication, *Troubleshooting guide: Competency based assessment* (Western Australian Department of Education and Training 2005) uses a highly supportive problem-solving approach to identify and provide strategies for addressing common assessment issues faced by registered training organisations. Issues are grouped according to assessment stages, from managing the evidence-gathering process through to reasonable adjustment, dealing with language and literacy requirements and minimising documentation.
>
> The treatment of assessment issues follows a consistent format: 'challenges—discussion—strategies— remember', with each issue clearly stated and dealt with in no more than two pages. The focus of the resource is on helping training providers to improve assessment practices rather than on 'telling them they need to shape up'.
>
> The resource was initially distributed as a draft and invited input from a wide range of practitioners before being finalised.

Organisational support and professional development

The lack of organisational support and professional development in using equity resources was identified by a large number of respondents as a key issue in their limited uptake and implementation. The lack of focus on organisational support and professional development to encourage the uptake of resources was perceived by many as another reflection of the 'done that—let's move on' approach to resource development generally. Some saw it as a naive belief in the power of technology (promoting resources on the net) to substitute for human interaction and support. Others saw it as the reflection of a cynical cost-reduction strategy at national and state level.

Both resource development managers and practitioners were acutely aware of the need to better support the introduction of new equity resources as well as their ongoing implementation. Three key areas of concern were identified:

✧ delineation of organisational responsibilities

✧ a 'people' not product approach

✧ efficacy and type of professional development.

Delineation of organisational responsibilities

As one resource developer observed, developers are often not in a position to influence the outcomes a resource is intended to deliver. Their involvement often ended with the production of the resource itself and its initial limited distribution to targeted organisations through steering committee or reference group members and trialling organisations. The promotion and implementation of the resource was usually outside their brief or sphere of influence, as well as, in many instances, that of the organisation funding the resource development.

Even where professional development could be offered, as in the case of large registered training organisations, decisions about how and to whom professional development was provided were often made by separate sections of the same organisation, so that resource developers and their managers felt unable to directly engage practitioners with new resources.

> In the long run, the decision about whether professional development comes with the resource isn't ours. In fact, we now try to develop our resources so that people won't need any [professional development] to be able to use them because we know that the likelihood of it happening is pretty slim anyway. (Program manager, registered training organisation)

Within registered training organisations and many industry skills councils, a consistent finding of the research was that there was often no clear perception of whose responsibility it was within an organisation to identify new equity resources as they became available and to introduce them to practitioners or other relevant persons. This did not appear to be because people were unwilling to take on the role but simply because the role was not identified as part of job descriptions, expectations, performance measures or reporting lines. In larger organisations there was a widespread assumption that someone else was either doing it or was responsible for doing it. Unless responsibilities were formally clarified, some industry representatives on resource development project steering committees, for example, commented that they felt their role ended when the project was completed. Yet the endorsement and 'championing' of new resources by both industry representatives and senior registered training organisation management was often critical in their acceptability in the VET sector.

While those at training manager and coordinator level (or equivalent) were clear about their role in supporting training and assessment, this rarely included the task of actively scanning the environment at regular intervals for existing or recently developed equity resources. Knowledge of equity resources was sometimes obtained from industry skills council or industry training advisory board newsletters and websites, or attendance at conferences and meetings. However, this was only possible where the industry skills council or industry training advisory board was active in promoting the resource. Other than this, finding out about equity resources was usually by word of mouth and acknowledged to be 'very hit and miss'.

Those in higher positions, particularly in larger training organisations, tended to assume that the identification and promotion of relevant equity resources was happening lower down the organisational line. Other than in specialist industry training providers, relatively few managers and coordinators were able to identify equity resources being used in training and, when specifically asked, were sometimes unable to comment on the uptake of nominated resources relevant to their industry area.

Most practitioners surveyed did not feel it was their responsibility to 'hunt down' new or existing equity resources but that it was the organisation's responsibility to identify useful resources and introduce them via some form of formal or informal professional development. Where this did not happen, practitioners tended to know about resources only through colleagues' recommendations, organisational newsletters or fliers, or where they had been given the opportunity to sight resources first-hand at conferences or meetings. Very few consulted industry skills council/industry training advisory board websites or websites outside their own organisation and very few used organisational libraries where such resources may have been lodged.

Practitioners also highlighted the time involved in searching for new resources in the context of their usefulness for casual or part-time staff. Many at resource developer and training manager/coordinator level commented on the perceived significant decline in organisational commitment to professional development. As already mentioned, many did not feel they had enough expertise to make web searches worthwhile and felt reasonably confident that their teaching methodologies were appropriate to different learners, or that they were able to refer learners with particular needs for specialist assistance elsewhere.

A 'people' not product approach

Most respondents disputed what they perceived as the prevailing view—that the quality of resources themselves guaranteed their uptake and implementation. In their opinion, this approach

severely underestimated the role of 'people—you know, the human component' in encouraging practitioners to engage with new resources, to shift attitudes and change teaching practices.

> If the aim is to change the way people think about how they teach—the way they try to make sure everyone has the best chance of succeeding—then resources aren't going to do it! It's *people* who make the difference when you're trying to change things not glossy fliers and resources, no matter how good they are.   (Practitioner, registered training organisation)

Reflecting the experiences of VET professionals involved in the equity-focused Reframing the Future projects (McKenna 2004), the importance of the human component was stressed by respondents, particularly in relation to areas where teachers felt 'outside their comfort zones'; for example, in dealing with learners with disabilities.

> The nature and complexity of different types of disabilities requires a human dimension to assist teachers to demystify, reduce fear of the unknown and develop their capacity and coping strategies, to frame them for success … we've found that teachers need to be mentored so they can develop confidence and specialised application of new knowledge or skills to their own context.   (Manager, registered training organisation)

Registered training organisation managers and practitioners, especially those in small organisations, stressed the value of interactive forums to enable them to think through issues and compare notes with colleagues. Practitioners new to the field commented on the usefulness of professional development workshops 'where you get to find out about resources more experienced people have found good—to work out first-hand who's used what, how relevant is it, how easy to use, how much it costs, how long it takes to get it, how much work to learn how to use it. You can't get these things from a website'.

It was also interesting to note, for example, that most participants attending the Western Australian professional development workshops introducing the resource *Working with diversity: A guide to equity and the AQTF* had actually received it by post months earlier, but 'had not got around to reading it'.

> In small RTOs, we wear too many hats, and find ourselves often drowning in information but not any the wiser as a result. For me, coming to a session like this is like going on a diet, something important that I've been intending to do for a while, but I need some incentive to make change happen. To help me to do that, I need to ask questions, engage with the issue, work out what the pros and cons are, see what others have done. You can only do that in a group situation.   (Manager, registered training organisation)

People approaches were considered crucial not only to short-term strategies such as the promotion of equity resources to practitioners, but also in relation to the provision of longer-term support for attitudinal change in the workplace environment.

As the comment above indicates, while professional development workshops were considered important in introducing practitioners to new and existing equity resources, many felt that the impetus gained from them was lost or diminished without ongoing support. Mentoring as a longer-term strategy was widely commended for the ongoing, face-to-face and interactive nature of the support it offered.

> It's not good enough just showing someone a resource and saying 'it's great, try it out'. If it's an electronic resource, for example, I might need to have someone sit with me and show me around it. I need someone to run to if there are problems and someone to say 'how's it going?' so I don't just give up because there's no way I'm going to keep going if I don't get that support.   (VET teacher)

Efficacy and type of professional development

While acknowledging the importance of professional development, a number of program managers and practitioners were keen to emphasise the need for careful targeting of such activities to ensure that the appropriate personnel attended and were equipped to use the resource:

Unless you do some careful planning, you can easily get the serial workshop attenders, or the gatekeepers–managers who find the time to attend interstate conferences and seminars, but not to disseminate the knowledge and skills to their colleagues when they return.

<div align="right">(Professional development manager)</div>

With PD [professional development] it needs to be very practical and focused, otherwise it's of little use. Firstly, you need to have the right people in the room, who own the issue. Then the take home messages should be: how can you use this? What will you do in your workplace as a result of today? To what degree will it benefit others in the organisation? What's the next step to make it happen?

<div align="right">(Professional development manager)</div>

Examples of cost-effective professional development strategies linked to equity resources cited included:

✧ integrating professional development as part of the resource development and implementation

✧ establishing sustainable, focused communities of practice

✧ ensuring regular industry or course-specific updates for practitioners.

Integrating professional development as part of resource development and implementation

Resource developers commented on the different ways by which a significant number of VET practitioners could be involved in the different stages of resource development; for example, in the scoping and needs analysis stages, and trialling and evaluation of drafts. However, they also stressed the importance of a practical, outcomes-focused approach that provided value for the practitioners involved:

Even if the project funds cover attendance costs, you're basically asking busy people to give up some of their time to assist in developing a resource that might be useful for them down the track. So it has to be very practical, and focused on their priorities i.e. what problem is this trying to solve for them? What value is there for them to be involved? It may be an opportunity to bring all stakeholders together to discuss an issue of mutual concern and find out what they're all doing, and what the latest research or industry developments are. Or it may be an opportunity to learn how to use multimedia technologies, or do assessment validation. They need to see that through the process, they will develop some skills, and have input into a resource that will eventually make their job easier.

<div align="right">(Resource development manager)</div>

In Western Australia, the VET Program and Development Branch offers short workshops to introduce new resources, such as the *Working with diversity: A guide to equity and the AQTF* (Robertson et al. 2004a) and the *Troubleshooting guide: Competency based assessment* (Western Australian Department of Education and Training 2005). As one of the managers responsible for the program explained*:*

We've found some professional development to familiarise people with a new resource is essential because it builds up confidence. We usually hold a workshop, using a Train the Trainer model, and give the resource out to participants as part of the deal. You can send boxes out, but we've found it just doesn't penetrate to the right person, and even when it does, it sits on the shelf, waiting for them to have a spare couple of hours to go through it.

Establishing sustainable, focused communities of practice

Communities of practice which enable ongoing contact and support in relation to particular learning, training and assessment issues were seen by teachers as a valuable tool in achieving and sustaining longer-term change.

> What's the use of 'doing professional development' if what you go back to is a vacuum? So often, you get great ideas and see great resources. You get all fired up and you go back with real intentions of doing things differently. But then there's no one there to help keep it going, so somehow you find yourself just doing things the way you used to because it's so much easier. (Practitioner)

As this comment indicates, implementing equity resources requires a supportive organisational culture within the registered training organisation to support and sustain changed teaching and learning practices.

Respondents in a number of states were able to identify valuable formal and informal networks and communities of practice which assisted them to locate and use new resources. While some were tied to course-specific delivery and moderation, such as the Certificates in Education for Adults (CGEA), others were industry-based or more generic registered training organisation and assessor networks.

> The report *Making the connections: 48 ways to progress equity in the national vocational education and training system* (McKenna 2004) documents the experiences of projects funded through a Reframing the Future equity initiative in 2003 using an action research model. It demonstrates how registered training organisations and individual VET practitioners' capabilities were significantly increased through ongoing collaboration between VET and equity support organisations and specialists. It is interesting to note that many of these collaborations and communities have continued well beyond the duration of the project.

Regular industry or course-specific updates to practitioners

A number of state training agencies, skills councils, large training providers and product distributors offer short professional development opportunities regularly with the aim of familiarising practitioners with learning and teaching resources.

As noted above, the Western Australian VET Program and Development Branch conducts yearly three-day training forums for the whole VET sector, as well as regular workshops and 'hot topic breakfasts' with the aim of supporting the implementation of training packages and improving the quality of VET. Topics are selected following a needs analysis and survey of potential participants. According to the organisers, these forums are very well attended and appreciated by participants for the opportunity they provide to be introduced to new local and interstate developments, technologies and resources.

Similarly, a number of TAFE institutes in Western Australia hold annual conferences for their staff as a way of overcoming the obstacles posed by isolation and remoteness; for example, the Flexible Learning and Networking Professional Development Forum for West Coast TAFE, or the Training Resources Conference in Central West TAFE.

Distributors of resources, such as Australian Training Products and Westone, also run professional development 'Products into Practice' workshops on how to find and customise learning and assessment resources. Workshops have been conducted for specific industries to coincide with the introduction of new training packages or focusing on issues such as assessment or e-learning.

Implications

The research indicates that a wide range of quality learning and teaching resources have been developed to support an integrated approach to vocational education and training, thus embedding equity into the core business of training organisations' teaching, learning and workplace practices.

However, the findings also indicate that the inherent quality of resources or their promotion via pamphlets and websites is not sufficient to ensure their uptake. Many high-quality resources are unknown and unable to be updated or customised, with some being unnecessarily duplicated. The factors most impacting on uptake and implementation relate to the pre- and post-development phases of resource production.

The close connection between the way the resource development process is conceptualised and funded and the likelihood of equity resources being significantly taken up by the education and training sector has major implications for the funding bodies which control the application process and 'make the rules'. Product developers share the responsibility for helping to ensure the uptake and informed use of resources in the post-development phase. This research therefore suggests that, while implications can be drawn for many stakeholder groups, policy-makers/funders and product developers such as registered training organisations and industry skills councils are the most crucial amongst these groups.

Reconceptualising the equity resource development process

The research findings strongly suggest the need for policy-makers and funders to fundamentally reconceptualise the primary goal of equity resource development such that it becomes the uptake and use of resources. In this way individual and organisational equity outcomes rather than merely product completion will be achieved. This would mean the establishment of mechanisms to ensure the dissemination, use and continued relevance of the resource for a given period, such as three to five years, to obtain a viable return on public investment. Linking the development of resources to other strategic cycles, such as training package reviews, or to drivers such as the Australian Quality Training Framework, would significantly enhance their value.

This expanded cycle would include pre-development processes, such as a thorough investigation of needs, existing resources and scoping and trialling requirements. Post-development processes could include a highly developed strategy for marketing, dissemination, monitoring and evaluation of the completed product. Responsibility for the costs of these components of the cycle needs to be agreed in advance as part of the funding arrangement, and may involve in-kind contributions or commitment from other parties, such as industry bodies or registered training organisations, for the trialling, review, dissemination and implementation phases.

Such changes may result in fewer resources being developed, but the impact of resources to achieve the aims of funding programs and equity goals may be significantly enhanced.

Expanding the time frame

A longer-term view of product development has inevitable implications for time frames. The majority of current funding arrangements have 12-monthly time frames, which effectively preclude the pre- and post-development stages discussed above. A staged three-to-five year time frame would encompass the development of a brief or tender through to meaningful evaluation of the completed product.

Simplifying access and supporting uptake

The research suggests that many quality VET equity resources are not listed, are difficult to locate, or are insufficiently annotated on the net. Standardising requirements for developers of publicly funded resources to annotate their products for lodgement on selected, widely publicised sites would significantly enhance their potential uptake. Annotations may need to include sample pages and 'tasters' in CD-ROM format; selected sites would need to be adequately funded to publicise and maintain their resources. While practitioners found the plethora of education and training and equity databases bewildering, many also have concerns about the adequacy of a one-stop shop approach.

The research also suggests that practitioners valued focused professional development activities as a means of acquiring confidence and competence with new resources and more inclusive teaching practices. Further research is needed to establish the capabilities and practices of practitioners and to identify the most effective means of promoting their uptake of VET equity resources. Effective solutions may involve both people (professional development, organisational support, champions, formalised networking) and increased visibility and accessibility of resources on the net.

Embedding accountability for equity outcomes at all organisational levels

The research suggests that effective implementation of equity resources occurs as part of a wider commitment to equitable outcomes and that this can only be achieved with the involvement of all organisational levels. Organisations developing and delivering equity resources therefore need to adopt a deliberate strategy of integrating notions of equity and equitable outcomes against stated performance measures in the core business of the organisation and in all job roles and descriptions.

'Building equity in' rather than 'bolting equity on' may involve the identification of particular tasks at particular levels of the organisation; for example, identifying new equity resources as they come to hand, introducing training and assessment staff to these resources, supporting trainers and assessors on an ongoing basis with their implementation, regularly reviewing the usefulness of resources, and actively seeking input into the development of further resources.

In terms of continuous improvement, the research findings suggest that VET policy-makers and funding bodies consider the following questions.

✧ How is the effectiveness of the equity resource development program monitored and evaluated? Is it delivering an acceptable return in terms of uptake, implementation and impact?

✧ How can funding policies and guidelines be altered to promote a longer-term engagement with the life cycle of equity resources and their strategic integration with VET priorities and resources? What changes might be needed to monitoring and reporting processes, industry involvement and the expertise and processes required to assess applications?

✧ How effective are current national and state databases in maximising the accessibility of equity resources in terms of both discovery and purchasing? What are the most effective marketing and dissemination strategies for resources developed, and how can these strategies be best resourced?

✧ What are the limitations to supporting equity and cultural diversity in training through a primarily resource *product* approach as opposed to a resource *people* approach? How can these limitations be addressed?

The following questions are also suggested for registered training organisations and industry skills councils.

✧ To what extent is meeting diverse learner needs 'a central organising principle' of the business? How integrated are equity and cultural diversity issues with the core business of the organisation? What performance indicators exist to determine progress in meeting equity and diversity goals?

✧ How are practitioners introduced to new and existing equity resources? Whose responsibility is this? How are practitioners and other stakeholders supported to implement, sustain and share successful experiences and approaches to managing cultural diversity?

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Useful websites for equity learning resources

Australian Council for Adult Literacy *(*ACAL) <http://www.acal.edu.au/> for useful information on issues in adult literacy and numeracy learning and teaching, including the *Literacy Link* newsletter.

Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) <http://www.adcet.edu.au/> for information about inclusive teaching, learning and assessment strategies, accommodation, career and support services for people with disabilities in post-secondary education and training.

AEShareNet <http://www.aesharenet.com.au/> a central online point of access for more than 20 000 resources from a range of organisations, and licences for their use.

Supporting Adult and Applied Learning and Teaching (SAALT) <http://www.aris.com.au/search.html/>. The Adult Education Research and Information Service (ARIS) is now being hosted by SAALT with a large collection of adult education resources, specialising in adult literacy, language and numeracy, including Workplace English Language and Literacy program resources and those supporting Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA).

Australian Flexible Network: <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/> for information on e-learning skills, professional development opportunities, products, resources and support networks.

Australian Training Products <http://www.atpl.net.au/> the national not-for-profit publisher and distributor of endorsed training packages and VET support materials, including Workplace English Language and Literacy program-funded resources, TAFE Virtual Campus flexible learning materials (ex TAFE Frontiers) and Westone (WA state resources); produces a regular newsletter.

Billabong <http://www.billabong.gov.au/resources-vet/> hosts a range of VET professional development information and resources for Indigenous staff and cultural awareness information.

EdNA <http://www.edna.edu.au/vet.html/> an Australia-wide education and training information service with an easy-to-access list of resources and guides to online resources.

LiteracyNet, National Adult Literacy and Workplace English Language and Literacy program resources <http://www.dest.gov.ay/literacynet/> and <http://www.dest.gov.au/literacynet/resources1.htm/>. These websites provide information on adult literacy and numeracy resources, research, professional development and funding, including annotated resources developed under ANTA Adult Literacy National Projects (including Innovative Projects) and the Workplace English Language and Literacy program.

Managing Diversity <http://www.immi.gov.au/multicultural/diversity/> for information, resources, case studies and links on issues relating to relating to businesses, government and community organisations managing cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as access and equity.

National Training Information Service <http://www.ntis.gov.au/> lists noted support materials under relevant training package or particular unit of competence or qualification.

Reframing the Future <http://reframingthefuture.net/> for professional development and change management programs to support the national training system.

State-based websites

New South Wales Department of Education and Training <http://www.skillsonline.net.au/> (replaces the Clearinghouse).

New South Wales Crown Copyright Curriculum Network <http://www.nswcccn.net/private/map/map.cfm>.

TAFE NSW Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) <http://www.oten.edu.au/learningware/>.

Queensland Department of Employment and Training, Centre for Training Materials <http://www.trainandemploy.qld.gov.au/partners/training_packages_and_courses/index.html>.

Victorian Office of Training and Tertiary Education <http://trainingsupport.otte.vic.gov.au/default.cfm>.

TAFE Frontiers <http://www.tafevc.com.au>.

Western Australian Department of Education and Training <http://vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au/home/>.

Westone <http://www.westone.wa.gov.au/>.

Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Dusting off the shelves: Getting the most value out of vocational education and training equity resources—Support document.* It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1700.html>.

The document contains a list of those consulted as part of this project and a copy of the questionnaire they were asked to complete.