

Client & Student Voice Action Group

Consultation Report

A report on the consultations with stakeholders of the National Training System on new national Client Advisory Arrangements for the Vocational Education & Training system

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National Client Advisory Mechanisms for Vocational Education and Training

Consultation Report

Introduction

Framework for the New National Training System

The Framework for the New National Training System represents the agreed position of the Australian, state and territory governments for the new national training system. It provides detail of the arrangements that support the 2005-08 Commonwealth State Funding Agreement for Skilling Australia's Workforce.

The national training system is built around two frameworks:

- A *National Governance and Accountability Framework*, which establishes the decision making processes and bodies responsible for training, as well as planning and monitoring arrangements to guide the operation and growth of the training system; and
- A *National Skills Framework*, which sets out the system's requirements for quality and national consistency in terms of qualifications and the delivery of training.

As part of the *National Governance and Accountability Framework*, express provision is made for the voice to be heard of clients and students of the national training system.

Mechanisms for engaging with students will be built into the national training arrangements, including through each jurisdiction and the Australian Government supporting client advisory arrangements to ensure that views of all students, particularly disadvantaged students, are considered in training planning and delivery.

The multilateral and bilateral funding agreements will include specific elements to improve outcomes for Indigenous Australians and people with a disability. A national Action Group will be established to develop these elements, which will include:

- *National priorities for improving outcomes for these client groups, drawn from the revised Blueprints, Partners in a Learning Culture and Bridging Pathways;*
- *Strategies to address each priority; and*
- *Performance measures to monitor the success of each strategy.*

The Action Group will develop recommendations for the Ministerial Council on the best mechanisms to support ongoing high level advice on the needs of all learners, particularly people with a disability and Indigenous Australians.

Given the priority to establish effective new client advisory mechanisms, this Action Group will be established immediately. It will consult with client groups in developing arrangements for Ministers' consideration, recognizing that different arrangements may be required for different groups.

Client and Student Voice Action Group

The Terms of Reference for the Client and Student Voice Action Group (the Action Group) reflect the Framework and require the development of recommendations in relation to two client related issues:

- 1) *National Client Advisory Mechanisms*
 - The best mechanisms to support ongoing high level advice on the needs of all learners, particularly people with a disability and Indigenous Australians
- 2) *National Priorities, Strategies and Performance Measures*
 - Develop national priorities for improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians and people with a disability, drawn from the revised Blueprints, *Partners in a Learning Culture* and *Bridging Pathways* for the multilateral and bilateral funding agreements for the new national training system; and
 - Develop strategies to address each of these priorities; and
 - Develop performance measures for the multilateral and bilateral funding agreements.

In relation to the national client advisory mechanisms, the Action Group is asked to:

- Investigate advisory models used by other sectors in Australia;
- Consider a range of mechanisms for engaging with clients, including representative committees, roundtables, forums, focus groups and surveys;
- Consult with key stakeholders at a national and state and territory level about the range of advisory mechanisms;
- Prepare a report outlining detailed proposals for new client advisory arrangements, including any financial requirements; and
- Oversee the establishment of the new proposed arrangements once they have been agreed by Ministers, ensuring that they are in place by the end of June 2006.

The operational arrangements for the Action Group recognize that in developing national client advisory arrangements, one model may not meet the needs of all

client groups. Accordingly, the Action Group was split into the following three subgroups to develop appropriate client advisory models:

- Indigenous clients;
- People with a disability; and
- All other client groups.

Separate reference groups were established for each of the three subgroups, comprising representatives from previous client advisory committees (including industry and provider representatives) and the Australian and state/territory governments. The role of the subgroups is to provide advice for consideration by the Action Group, which in turn will develop consolidated advice for the National Senior Officer's Committee.

To assist the consultation process, the previous advisory mechanisms for the national training system (being the Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council and the Australian Disability Advisory Council) each prepared papers outlining their preferred client voice model¹.

Approach to the consultations

The consultation phase was conducted from January – March 2006 and had two parts: a call for written submissions and a program of stakeholder consultations.

Written submissions

The call for written submissions was designed to maximize the potential contributions to the development of the client advisory mechanisms from the widest possible range of interested parties. Letters were sent via email to a broad range of stakeholder groups including industry associations, skills bodies, peak community organisations and Registered Training Organisations as well as organisations and individuals who had registered an interest in receiving information about the Action Group's work. Emails were also sent to state and local agencies via each of the relevant State/Territory Training Authorities. The consultations were further publicized through the internal publications of various peak bodies and associations and the consultation papers were made available on the DEST website.

The consultations were assisted by three separate consultation papers developed by the respective subgroups. The consultation papers were customized for each of the subgroups' constituencies but had a basic common framework whereby comments were sought on:

- The objectives of the advisory arrangements;

¹ This report does not repeat the preferred client advisory models from the Councils as the Action Group can access their views from the respective consultation papers.

- The proposed principles for the advisory arrangements²; and
- Possible advisory models.

The period for providing submissions was stated to close on 17 February. In the event, submissions were received and considered into the middle of March. Over forty submissions were received by the Action Group secretariat. A list of the organizations and individuals who made a submission is provided in Appendix 1.

Stakeholder consultations

The stakeholder consultations took the form of five forums conducted in Sydney (3 March), Cairns (7 March), Darwin (9 March), Perth (14 March) and Adelaide (16 March). Individual states/territories contributed substantively and generously to the forums by organizing their operation and by providing 'scribes' to record the outcomes of the day.

The broad categories of stakeholder groups included:

- Representative bodies and individual representatives of the equity and client groups of the national training system;
- Education and training providers, including public and private sector peak bodies and individual providers;
- Community sector bodies;
- Industry associations, representing both employer and employee interests, and individual business owners;
- State and territory and Australian government agencies;
- Other bodies, such as Group Training Companies, New Apprenticeship Centres and Employment agencies; and
- Interested individuals.

² The proposed principles took the following general form:

1. The activities of the new advisory arrangement should be consistent with the principles of the National Training Framework
2. The arrangement should
 - a. Have a clearly defined scope of activity
 - b. Adopt an evidence based approach to providing advice
 - c. Provide advice that is action orientated and leads to tangible training/employment outcomes
 - d. Be credible with the client group through appropriate, transparent and accountable processes
 - e. Be well connected to the national training system (NTS) with the capacity to influence to training planning and delivery
 - f. Recognize and be responsive to other initiatives impacting on the NTS
 - g. Be innovative and flexible
 - h. Have an intellectual leadership role
3. recognize that much work has been done, including by AITAC and ADTAC, and that priorities and strategies will be built on.

A total of more than 240 participants attended the forums.

The forums were organized in three parts:

- Session 1 - set out: the purpose and background to the forum; a description of the new national training system and roles and responsibilities of the Action Group; a brief history of equity arrangements in training; and a snap shot of the high level issues derived from the submissions to date;
- Session 2 - where participants 'broke out' into the three client groups, facilitated by the conveners of the subgroups, to consider the detail of the client advisory mechanisms for those groups; and
- Session 3 - involved a report back of the outcomes of the break-out groups' deliberations and consideration of the next steps in the process.

Participants were invited to provide further comments to supplement their contributions on the day.

Analysis and reporting

This report describes the general outcomes of the consultations. It doesn't purport to represent the detailed views of those consulted. Rather, it identifies and articulates the broad set of responses to the consultation papers and related issues raised in the submissions and during the forums.

The remainder of this report is organized in three main parts to reflect the outcomes of the consultations for each of the three client groups: indigenous clients and students of VET; clients of VET with a disability; and other clients of VET. Each part is organized as follows:

- A description of the overarching issues raised, including those issues that don't strictly fall within the terms of reference of the Action Group;
- Comments on the objectives related to the new advisory arrangements;
- Comments on the proposed principles for the new advisory arrangements;
- Detailed consideration of the operational characteristics of the new advisory arrangements; and
- The views of commentators on future priorities and initiatives for the new advisory arrangements.

The report concludes with a brief description of the outcomes of the consultations where support is provided for an integrated approach to the operation of the advisory arrangements for the three client subgroups of VET.

Indigenous clients

Overarching issues

There is overwhelming support for a dedicated Indigenous advisory mechanism, such as represented in the past by the Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council (AITAC). There is also widespread support for the continuation of the AITAC model itself and in particular the need to build on the policy foundations set by the revised Blueprint, *Partners in a Learning Culture*. Notwithstanding this general support, there is also a view that the AITAC model should not just simply be reincarnated and that the opportunity should be taken to reconsider the model in the interests of securing the best outcomes for Indigenous VET students. In this context, the philosophy of dealing with Indigenous VET issues as part of the mainstream business of VET was advanced. An extension of this line of argument would see, in the long term, Indigenous people fairly incorporated into and not segregated from the national training system.

The support for a stand-alone Indigenous advisory mechanism relates in part to the strongly-held view that there should be inclusive and representative Indigenous involvement in all levels of decision making. A number of commentators press for Indigenous representation on other key bodies in the national training system, including the National Quality Council, the National Industry Skills Committee, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and the Industry Skills Councils.

There was substantial consensus that outcomes for Indigenous VET need to be broadly framed and should include community development and well-being, individual learner development, social justice and self-determination as well as pathways and training and employment outcomes. Outcomes in these terms require a long-term policy framework, partnerships with government and strong linkages between the advisory mechanisms and other education sectors, such as schools, adult and community education and higher education.

The existence of effective Indigenous VET advisory structures in every state and territory, with full accountability for the implementation of national directions and commitments through the multilateral and bilateral resource processes, is seen as an essential precondition to the successful operation of the national advisory arrangements. With these structures in place, there then needs to be strong linkages forged between the national, state and local advisory arrangements.

There is a unanimous call for the Indigenous advisory arrangements to be properly resourced, particularly at their commencement in terms of induction processes and capability building for participants. There is also a consistent line of commentary about the need for closer engagement between industry and the Indigenous advisory arrangements.

Finally, the consultations for the Indigenous advisory arrangements acted as the trigger for a general point to be made about the uncertainty in the documentation's use of the terms 'client' and 'student'. The interchangeable use of the terms is a concern because students are not necessarily clients and clients are not necessarily students. Furthermore, in setting up the overall framework for an advisory

arrangement in this way, it is thought that stakeholders are excluded who are neither clients nor students (e.g. teachers, educators, Indigenous elders). A definition of 'client' and an explanation of the distinction between clients and students is called for.

Other specific issues from the consultations which fall outside the specific scope of the Action Group's terms of reference but will impact on the work of the Indigenous advisory arrangements include:

- Language, literacy and numeracy and culture and language, especially as reflected in training packages;
- Completion of apprenticeships and the need for additional 'tutorial support';
- The flexibility of the training system to meet the needs of Indigenous students, including the mechanisms for user-choice funding; and
- Pathways from school to work and the tracking of Indigenous student participation.

Objectives

The consultations reveal a clear preference for the overall purpose of the Indigenous advisory arrangements to be framed broadly. This is expressed variously as defining VET outcomes in a multifaceted way to pick up the personal and community dimension or as requiring the overlay of a cultural framework which deals with systemic issues such as racism and discrimination.

The discussion of objectives for the advisory arrangements acted as the prompt for a strong reaction that consultation and communication strategies need to be effective, fair and equitable.

Principles

The proposed principles were largely endorsed in the consultations, albeit with suggestions for both simplification and supplementation in terms of the following themes³:

- Community needs, community capacity building and sustainable development;
- Involvement at all levels of decision-making critical to increasing Indigenous participation and outcomes;
- Plans for training must occur in partnership with local communities;

³ Some of these supplementary principles repeat themes addressed in the overarching issues and are included to assist the subgroup in settling the final form of agreed principles, including consideration as to whether they are best categorized as principles or initiatives/strategies.

- Capacity building to enhance the ability of representatives to contribute to the arrangements;
- Close connectedness with the client group; and
- Adequate resourcing.

Operational characteristics

There are a number of aspects to the operation of the Indigenous advisory arrangements, including the overall architecture; roles; membership (including leadership); support (including secretariat); reporting lines; and engagement/coordination.

Architecture

There is substantial support for a two-tiered arrangement, comprising:

- A high-level strategic advisory body; and
- A broadly-based forum of Indigenous stakeholders.

Roles

The roles of the advisory body are widely seen to be high-level and strategic (as opposed to operational), to require the exercise of strong leadership and advocacy on the part of Indigenous interests in VET, to focus on the formation of strategic partnerships across and beyond the training system and to act as the focal point for monitoring the implementation of agreed policy at the national and state level.

The role of the forum is articulated as being to bring together all stakeholders and to make a substantive, grass-roots-driven contribution to policy development and prioritization. A minimum of two forums per year is commonly suggested.

Membership

There are some commonly-held views on the membership of the advisory group. This consensus tends to relate to the qualities of the individuals, who need to be senior figures from positions of authority with a passion for VET and substantial knowledge and experience. There is similar consensus that the group should not be too large and unwieldy and shouldn't comprise 'career committee' members.

There are also strongly-held and divergent views on membership. There is a clear philosophical divide between those commentators who see the need for the group to comprise representatives from state and territory VET systems (perhaps drawn from the chairs of those state arrangements or alternatively nominated by Ministers) and those who see the need for the members to be independent of state systems - drawing upon community, provider and industry representatives. A variation on these themes involves support for a body with half the membership representing VET and half comprising business leaders and industry peak body representatives.

Other commentators prefer to simply list the mix of categories proposed for representation: state Indigenous advisory bodies; State/Territory Training

Authorities; Indigenous employer organizations; Indigenous community controlled training providers (including those delivering primary health care); student representative and funding bodies; industry associations and skill councils. Still others focus on the need for a mix of non-Indigenous and Indigenous representation; and a minority advocate for equal gender representation. There is some support for an arrangement whereby additional members can be recruited or co opted to work on particular matters and for the allocation of subject matter responsibilities along portfolio lines to individual committee members according to their backgrounds and expertise.

The chairing arrangements attract an equally diverse set of opinions. Some advocate a single chair (pointing to the confusion in the lines of accountability in a dual arrangement). Others support a dual chairing arrangement, although there are different views about whether the co-chair who is not a senior Indigenous person should come from industry (and perhaps the National Industry Skills Committee) or should be a state/territory CEO who is a member of the National Senior Officials Committee.

There is a general view that the stakeholder forum should be broadly-based, with commentators making explicit reference to the need to include Indigenous students and providers. The diverse knowledge of participants and their networking capabilities are emphasized. There is a further view that the selection of participants should be transparent, with the selection processes and criteria widely advertised. Another school of thought suggests that the forum should not be a 'standing' forum and should involve a changing mix of people and expertise, with invitations issued according to the particular theme of the forum.

The National Apprenticeship Roundtable where student activities are project specific and focused on achievable solutions is offered as a good model to follow, while the relationship between the forum and the National Indigenous Education Conference is highlighted.

Support

A dedicated secretariat for the advisory arrangements is proposed. The roles of the secretariat are viewed as including: supporting the operations of the advisory group and forum; management of reporting, analysis and issues identification; implementing knowledge management processes and developing and managing a communications strategy.

There is a difference of opinion about whether the secretariat should be wholly independent of government or operate with line accountability to government. A mid-point would see the secretariat 'housed' within government, but with the executive officer recruited by the advisory body and accountable to that body. A strong view is expressed that the secretariat should not be responsible to the forum.

The need for research support is identified in the consultations, with a formal research partnership with the NCVET endorsed. The need for the advisory group to access skilled facilitation services and academic and policy-making expertise is also mentioned.

Reporting

There is an even division of commentary between those who propose the advisory group report directly to the Ministerial Council and those who advocate reporting and accountability to the National Senior Official's Committee. Others either propose or oppose a reporting relationship to the Action Group. Both positions are misconceived as the Action Group will have a limited life and will wind up when the substantive advisory arrangements have been finally agreed.

Engagement/coordination

The overwhelming majority of those consulted agree on the imperative for strong linkages between the advisory arrangements and local communities. The bottom-up approach where local information and knowledge is utilized at the national level is constantly held out as a pre-requisite, as is the capacity of the advisory body to link into state and other national systems. State and regional forums, with input from TAFE institutes, other registered training organizations, industry and employers are proposed as a way of gathering information on existing and future training needs; as are campus student forums to gather directly the views of students. The engagement with key people in RTOs is also seen as critical to ensuring Indigenous students receive the maximum benefits at the program delivery level.

Working relationships are proposed for the advisory group with Industry Skills Councils (responsible for the key products and services in the national training system), the IECB Group, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, the New Apprenticeships Roundtable and the National Youth Careers and Transitions Advisory Group.

Initiatives/priorities

The consultations identified a range of priorities and initiatives for the advisory group to pursue, including:

- Attention to the relationships and linkages to other existing advisory arrangements, with a view to establishing a broad coalition to progress the unfinished business represented by the six priorities in *Partners in a Learning Culture*;
- Performance measures to be identified and data regularly presented to enable effective monitoring of policy priorities – such measures to reflect local needs, priorities and programs and to be related to community and individual development outcomes;
- Existing funding, reporting and accountability measures to be used to ensure the advice of the group is actioned at all levels of the national training system;
- Progressing work on a culture of learning that reflects the ways Indigenous students learn best and integrating Indigenous models of teaching and learning into mainstream practice; and

- Addressing the skill needs and labour shortages of the present and future labour markets with the development of culturally appropriate training initiatives.

In practical terms, the following process is recommended: convene the forum to determine priority business; develop an action plan to address the six priorities in *Partners in a Learning Culture*; and review actions/lack thereof over the past 12 months.

Finally, there is an exhortation to focus on a small number of key issues and do them well, rather than seeking to be everything to everybody.

Clients with a disability

Overarching issues

There was universal support in the consultations to locate the work of the disability advisory arrangements within a broad social and economic reform agenda, usually referred to as the 'whole of life approach'. This approach recognizes that the issues challenging people with a disability cross all the boundaries within which services and initiatives are normally constructed and that people's real-life needs will only be met with a coordinated approach between the policies, programs and services delivered for the benefit of people with a disability.

The 'whole of life approach' is invariably linked with the need for a 'whole of government' approach – the imperative for which was commonly referenced in the consultations to the fact that the 'whole of life approach' is the responsibility of everyone and no-one. Without a coordinated effort across government the necessary reforms won't be realized. For this specific purpose, commentators are looking for a coordinating agency to take forward the 'whole of life approach'.

In terms of the specific responsibilities of the advisory mechanisms for VET, the corollary to the overarching concerns above is the need for their advice to be widely relevant and influential across a number of federal and state agencies and across the full span of industry groups.

There is broad support for the new disability advisory arrangements to build on the work undertaken in the revised Blueprint for the implementation of *Bridging Pathways*, although there is also a recurring theme in the consultations about the relative lack of progress in implementation of the Blueprint and the need for some reconfiguration of the ADTAC model. The need for accountability for implementation of the Blueprint to be built into the bilateral funding agreements between the Australian and state/territory is also emphasized by those consulted.

Adequate resourcing is seen as a prerequisite to the success of the new advisory arrangements, with some commentators indeed defining the very effectiveness of the mechanisms in terms of their capacity to influence governments to increase funding to training providers.

The need for the disability advisory arrangements to remain alert and responsive to the dynamics of their strategic context (e.g. Welfare to Work; skill shortages; the ageing of the workforce and population generally) and to acknowledge current and past regulation in the area of disability education access (e.g. the Disability Discrimination Act and Education Standards) features in the consultations.

Other specific issues identified in the consultations that strictly fall outside the terms of reference of the Action Group but will impact on the work of the disability advisory arrangements include:

- The absence of continuity in the support from VET to the workplace;
- Recognizing that empowerment for people with a disability needs to start in schools and that engagement with school students needs to be on the basis of their individual needs;
- The need for piecemeal research in the VET disability area to be collated and activated;
- Support for examining the opportunities for a case management approach that builds on interagency coordination; and
- Consideration of more sophisticated and diverse preparatory programs.

Objectives

The consultations reveal a clear preference to build on the purpose of the disability advisory arrangements to incorporate social and community factors.

Principles

The intent of the proposed principles was generally endorsed in the consultations. The following additional themes were also considered:

- For students with a disability, flexible delivery and inclusive practice principles are the foundation for the development of creative options and pathways; they also often result in additional time and resources to complete courses;
- Training is not just for young people, but must also cater for late-on set disability;
- The individual learner needs to be at the centre of policy and practice;
- Impairment is not the disabling factor but rather the social and economic consequences that are represented by and derive from that disadvantage; and
- VET is important to realizing potential and developing skills for effective work and social participation.

A specific additional principle was introduced – that the operation of the new advisory arrangements should be based on an in-depth understanding of the nature and dynamics of each type of individual disability.

Operational characteristics

There are a number of aspects to the operation of the advisory arrangements for people with a disability, including the overall architecture; roles; membership (including leadership); support (including secretariat); reporting lines; and engagement/coordination.

Architecture

There is general support for a dedicated national peak advisory body responsible for setting the policy framework for disability in VET.

Some commentators refer to the desirability of an annual roundtable to gather the views of the broad disability stakeholder community. More often, those consulted refer to the need for close alignment between the advisory body and:

- Complementary arrangements in states/territories so that the work is conducted within a commonly defined framework and set of expectations; and
- Groups, such as communities, teachers and students at a local level who are closer to delivery.

Roles

The roles of the advisory body are widely seen to involve some/all of the following:

- Exercising leadership, based on comprehensive arrangements for consultation and communication with client and student groups;
- Providing advice and driving action across and within state training and other government agencies and industry groups and associations;
- Providing specific advice on performance measures and benchmarks;
- Identifying strategic priorities, undertaking projects and commissioning research;
- Advocating for the allocation of appropriate funding;
- Engaging with stakeholders;
- Advocating for current public policy on disability e.g. the education standards; and
- Commissioning the establishment of working groups relevant to priority issues.

A proposition is put forward that the advisory body is not primarily a consultative group and that states/territories should have the responsibility to ensure that communities, industry, employers, students and teachers have a voice in the advisory processes and are engaged in achieving the outcomes required.

Membership

There is considerable support for broad representation on the advisory group, including from a cross-section of disability service providers and training organizations, government agencies, human resource managers, peak employer and employee bodies, industry skills councils and key members of the community who work with or care for people with a disability. Some support exists for the membership to comprise the chairs or representatives from the state-based disability advisory arrangements.

There is a general view that the members should be influential, reflect the diversity of clients and represent the broader issues associated with learning for people with a disability. Having a disability itself is not usually seen as a prerequisite for membership. There is a push for more practitioners and fewer bureaucrats and, less forcefully, that the membership is nominated by peak national disability agencies and not Ministers.

The consultations reveal the potential tension in identifying who should lead the advisory mechanism because of the need for a high level of expertise around issues of disability within an education and training context. This level of knowledge and expertise may not reside within any one member and there is an argument advanced for adopting the ADTAC co-chair model as a means of gaining high level direction from both perspectives.

Support

There was little comment on the secretariat arrangements. One commentator believes the secretariat should be provided by the Department of Education, Science and Training, albeit within an agreed framework that allows a level of independence and fearlessness in advice from the advisory body to government. Another proposes the secretariat comprise individuals with contacts and networks within the states/territories.

Reporting

The majority view proposes a strong and formal reporting line from the advisory group, through the National Senior Official's Committee to the Ministerial Council. There is little support for a direct reporting relationship to Ministers.

Engagement

The need for the advisory group to engage with other significant advisory mechanisms is endorsed with this developing through identification of relevant groups and either attending their meetings, having guest positions on the advisory group or through the establishment of joint working parties.

Engagement is suggested with a range of interested parties, including carers and their partners; disability liaison officers and coordinators (including the network of practitioners within TAFE Institutes), representative disability advocacy groups,

trade union movement, the DEWR Disability Open Employment Services Program and other government agencies dealing with immigration, justice and health matters.

Links are also proposed with the Employer Demand Action Plan developed by the Employers Roundtable for People with Disabilities, the Disability Advisory Group and the National Inquiry into Employment and Disability.

The difficulty of engaging with the student voice is thought to lie with the part time nature of their study program and the need to consider how additional requests impact on their disability and training. Regular local level engagement with VET clients with a disability is identified as a valuable way to get a perspective on their on-the-ground activity.

The mechanisms proposed for engagement are many and varied and include:

- Regular local forums for specific stakeholder groups (rather than mixing everyone together);
- Annual 'futures-focused' workshops in each state/territory;
- Addressing peak bodies and statewide reference groups on a regular basis to get an understanding of current trends, issues and barriers;
- Connecting with area consultative committees who share the same national charter but work differently;
- The utilization of individual providers to take responsibility for engaging services and individuals within their own service areas;
- Developing a website to enable stakeholders to log examples of good and poor practice;
- Developing information brochures which address commonly asked questions to be distributed by providers to their contacts; and
- The activation of 'champions', although there is also some caution expressed about this concept so as not to be seen to suggest employing people with a disability is a heroic gesture or task.

Initiatives/priorities

The consultations identified a number of priorities and initiatives for the disability advisory body to pursue, including:

- Progressing the 'whole of life' agenda, including by way of a national public-private partnership focused on disability reform;
- The need for effective performance measures, focused on success indicators that are broader than measuring training alone, embedded in the mainstream VET planning process;

- An arrangement with the NCVET to develop a national research strategy for people with a disability in VET which addresses, in part, why people with a disability make particular VET choices and do not disclose their disability and which undertakes a longitudinal study of employment outcomes and benefits;
- Provider staff development in relation to the needs of learners with a disability; and
- The conduct of a scoping exercise to discover all major initiatives across states/territories, to map commonalities, examine outcomes and link people engaged in related initiatives.

Other client groups of VET

Overarching issues

A number of those consulted point to a conceptual confusion or uncertainty in relation to the overall scope and focus for this group. The questions are asked: is the group designed to cover all clients and students who need a voice in VET? Or is the group designed to cover clients and students (other than learners with a disability and Indigenous learners) within the specified categories of disadvantage? e.g. women, regional and remote learners and communities, people in correctional facilities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, socio-economically disadvantaged learners and communities, mature-aged and disadvantaged youth.

While agreeing that all clients and students should have an opportunity to express their views about their education, the majority of those consulted applied their thinking about these particular advisory arrangements to disadvantaged learners who do not have a disability and are not Indigenous Australians.

For the purpose of disadvantaged learners, the following dual focus for the advisory arrangements is proposed:

- Consideration of the common issues and barriers for all, or a range of, learners with the aim of improving the inclusiveness and responsiveness of the VET system overall; and
- Consideration of issues and barriers specific or unique to particular target groups.⁴

There is a divergence in opinion about the relative priority between the two foci. One line of thought suggests that priority attention should be paid to the common issues

⁴ A third tier is also proposed to deal with emerging client groups and their issues, although it might be argued this group could be accommodated in the two tier concept proposed and become a byproduct of having effective consultative processes in place.

because this will have the greatest impact over the widest group. The alternative view is to proceed with both elements in parallel as the specific and unique issues facing the particular groups might be lost in the process of concentrating on common issues alone.

Notwithstanding these differences in emphasis, there is unanimity that for disadvantaged students there is a social agenda as well as an economic agenda. In other words, there is a role for the VET system in developing readiness in learners to learn as well as training for jobs. This is variously expressed as a 'whole of life' focus or addressing social inclusion and social justice. There is also unanimity that working with these types of learners takes more resources, support and time.

Commentators point to the existence of two strategies for particular client groups: *Women: Shaping our Future*; and the *National VET Strategy for Adult Offenders*. There is disappointment among a number of those consulted at the lack of progress with implementing the Women's strategy. Its implementation is seen as a priority task for the new advisory arrangements.

Finally, there is concern that a 'catch-all' category such as proposed for the general equity group must not become the basis for individual disadvantaged groups to have to compete for attention and funds (both across the three main categories and within the general equity category).

Other specific issues identified in the consultations that strictly fall outside the terms of reference of the Action Group but will impact on the work of the general equity advisory arrangements include the following:

- Humanitarian migrants have little or no English or literacy skills and no experience with formal education processes;
- Skilled migrants face a range of skills recognition and work transition challenges (e.g. inability to access government supports such as Job Network services) and learning barriers (e.g. language and culture);
- International students require social and cultural support structures and assistance;
- The limited availability of pre-vocational training that addresses employability skills;
- Providing support for students at times of transition within VET, during course changes and once initial training has been completed – including comprehensive career education and development (skills assessment and identification of skills shortage areas);
- The need for more consultation with equity groups in product development and definition of employability skills;
- The challenge of engaging small business;

- Low rates of apprenticeship wages;
- Additional costs of mentors and tutors for the general equity client base; and
- The difficulty in navigating the VET system, which is designed for a certain 'type' who are those looking for qualifications who require limited assistance.

Finally, one commentator offered a perspective of what constitutes a good approach to learning for disadvantaged clients.

Training is more welcoming, friendly and flexible in smaller classrooms delivered locally utilizing blended learning approach that allows greater access for carers, single parents and casual workers and provides life skills training and support.

Objectives

There was general agreement in the consultations to the broad objectives. The challenge is considered to lie in converting the objectives into substantive policy and practice.

Principles

There is general support for a set of principles built around concepts such as flexibility, continuous improvement, transparency and research. The following additional themes were considered:

- Systemic and whole of government perspectives with strong links to related initiatives in other sectors;
- Capacity building to enhance the contribution of client representatives;
- Connectedness to and credibility with the client group;
- A commitment to research, analysis and accountability;
- Access to a range of client voices through accessible communications and language; and
- The need for a long-term view.

Operational characteristics

There are a number of aspects to the operation of the advisory arrangements for clients in the general equity group, including the overall architecture; roles; membership (including leadership); support (including secretariat); reporting lines; and engagement/coordination.

Architecture

In 'operationalising' the proposed dual focus for the general equity advisory arrangements, it is suggested that the common issues and barriers could be addressed through a standing committee arrangement; while the specific issues could be met by a task force or working group with a mandate for a set period.

Under this model, the standing committee takes the form of a small strategic national advisory body. Some commentators also support the formation of a roundtable group of clients/consumers, while others suggest the formation of standing subgroups of the advisory body with specific portfolio responsibilities – for either particular groups or specific issues.

There was also a sense in the consultations that the opportunity might be taken to rethink the conventional approach to equity advisory arrangements built around structures and processes. Unfortunately, the sentiment wasn't backed up by concrete proposals, although there is an idea that the arrangements should build in their own redundancy. In other words, that the advisory body should think of its role less as a permanent representative of particular groups and more as a body that addresses issues, mainstreams the solutions and then moves on.

Roles

There are a number of suggestions for the role of the advisory arrangements. One commentator articulates two possible approaches:

- The 'governmental' model, where high level advice is structured around a number of:
 - Themes, which are broad categories of emerging policy priorities;
 - Issues, which are the main topics of concern within each theme; and
 - Key Performance Indicators, which measure the condition of the national training system in relation to each issue; and
- The 'strategic partnership or community' model, whereby:
 - VET students are provided with impartial and independent brokerage to represent their interests;
 - Networks of strategic partners are built to inform and work with government to address student needs; and
 - The strategic partner networks are used to undertake joined up research, projects and consultations.

Another perspective proposes that the main role of the advisory arrangements is to understand the actual barriers to successful participation for people from diverse backgrounds and life situations and to engage with relevant governing bodies to collaboratively work towards policy development that will aim to minimize such barriers.

The various elements of these approaches are picked up by a number of those consulted, who also go to the next level of detail by advocating roles in relation to:

- Guiding client and student engagement strategies;

- Collating research to date, synthesizing and analyzing data and information and recommending and overseeing further research;
- Acting as a knowledge broker and clearinghouse of good practice; and
- Guiding the analysis of the national VET strategy and its impact on disadvantaged clients and students.

Membership

There is a mix of views on the membership of the advisory group. Senior government officials, grass roots practitioners, those with direct experience of disadvantage ('live' people from that subgroup), representative intermediaries, industry associations and skills councils, service and training providers, students and teachers all get a mention.

Whatever the position or origin of the membership of the group, commentators consider they need to be well-informed, committed and from senior positions of influence.

In contrast to the different views on membership, there is consensus that the group should be led by a state/territory member of the National Senior Officials Committee.

Support

Proposed support structures for the new advisory arrangements include:

- A secretariat (perhaps provided by DEST) which spans the 'culture gap' between government and client advisory mechanisms. Secretariat staff should have community capacity building and/or adult education as well as policy formulation skills;
- Access to a pool of experts/specialists;
- An induction process for participants covering the role, responsibilities and processes of the advisory arrangement;
- A training/capacity building process for participants covering matters such as government systems, policy development, systems advocacy and community engagement mechanisms;
- Access to on-going professional development; and
- Systematic linkages to other advisory arrangements.

There is widespread endorsement of the role for research in informing the group's work. NCVET is seen as a key to evidence based policy and practice.

One commentator also suggests the need for a practical framework to be in place whereby:

- A way of picking through information, working out what's relevant and getting it out to group members in a succinct and timely way is developed;
- Time is built in for group members to get to know each other over coffee prior to meetings, one-hour lunch breaks during meetings etc;
- Proxies are discouraged, while continuity is encouraged (although balanced by fresh input by replacing half the group every two years); and
- Meetings start and finish on time and have a clearly defined statement of purpose and succinct supporting papers that cut through to the real issues.

Reporting

There is strong support for multiple reporting points – essentially to all points of influence in the framework for the new national training system: the Ministerial Council, the National Senior Officials Committee, the National Quality Council and the National Industry Skills Committee. Links to the bilateral funding agreements are also proposed.

Engagement

The need for a comprehensive approach to client and stakeholder engagement is apparent from the consultations. There is, however, a difference between commentators in their philosophies of engagement. Some propose engagement by the advisory arrangements with a limited number of participants who have the potential to guide engagement with wider groups of clients and students. Others demand grass roots access on the basis that the advisory group needs to know at first hand what is happening on the ground. Most commentators fall somewhere in between and propose a multi tiered consultative process with tiers extending from local communities to high level advisory groups.

One commentator proposes the following three levels of engagement:

- Direct representation of various sectors on the advisory group;
- Consultation/validation processes to engage other groups/individuals; and
- Raising general public awareness.

Notwithstanding the philosophical divide, there is a common call for active and regular engagement with bodies such as State Training Authorities, TAFE Institutes (and particularly their equity staff), other RTOs, Adult Learning Australia, Industry Skills Councils, group training companies, community based peak bodies (e.g. Anglicare and Centacare) and New Apprenticeship Centres. Coordination is also proposed with DEWR, FACS and Centrelink. The latter is seen as a key agency for the purpose of getting information to potential students and accessing them for consultation purposes.

Initiatives/priorities

The consultations identified a substantial number of priorities and initiatives for the advisory arrangements to pursue, including:

- Overcoming access barriers;
- Promotion of flexible delivery, Recognition of Prior Learning and other accelerated pathways;
- Development of performance measures and targets, with qualitative determination of learning and assessment methodologies as the focus;
- Commissioning work to disaggregate national and state VET data by gender and other equity related variables;
- Mapping equity projects undertaken, with analysis and synthesis undertaken and consolidated learning disseminated;
- Explicit and regularly revisited gender impact reviews to be included for all strategies and initiatives of the new advisory arrangements;
- The demographics within each equity group to be tracked and significant changes to be included as an evidence for recommendations to shift funding priorities;
- Cultural awareness professional development provided for teachers/trainers;
- Encourage shifts from specific client-based strategies to individual client-based or learner-centred strategies;
- Extension of the model developed by the Northern Territory, DEST and DEWR for networking/linking local community partnerships for information and resource sharing;
- The work on employability skills in Training Packages to be extended to take account of other factors impacting on people's ability to fully participate;
- Promotion of knowledgeable and targeted career and RPL advice/transition support from school/community to VET and from VET to employment; and
- Examination of the ACE model for disadvantaged students, many of whom lack confidence and have negative attitudes towards formal learning – thereby emphasizing the need for alternative learning pathways.

Integrated arrangements

There is some support for the introduction of an integrated approach to the operation of the national client advisory arrangements. The integrated approach could operate at three levels: in relation to the overall governance of the advisory mechanisms; a joint secretariat for the three subgroups; and general coordination between the subgroups.

Overall governance

An option for an advisory mechanism that draws the subgroups into an integrated structure was discussed. That structure would consist of a Governing Advisory Body which directs taskforces in the priority areas of Indigenous VET and Disability VET and establishes additional taskforces in other key priority areas.

The proposed Governing Advisory Body, to be chaired by a member of NSOC, would consist of a small group of key stakeholder representatives and would oversee activities of the Taskforces and provide a process to link common issues and successful initiatives developed by the individual Taskforces.

VET Taskforces would comprise key individuals nominated on the basis of their organisations involvement, seniority and experience. A representative from each Taskforce would sit as a member of the Governing Advisory Body.

Joint secretariat

The desirability of a combined or joint secretariat for the three subgroups was referred to in the consultations. In addition to delivering efficiencies through the improved economies of scale, a joint secretariat will enable knowledge and information to be shared systematically across the groups. Within the arrangements for any joint secretariat, dedicated resources would still be made available for each advisory arrangement.

Subgroup coordination

The obvious benefits in adopting a coordinated approach to the operation of the three subgroups were discussed. This coordination could be assisted by the chair/co chair of the subgroups meeting periodically - perhaps quarterly.

List of written submissions made in response to the CSVAG consultation papers

Listed below are the names of organisations/individuals who submitted a written response to the Client and Student Voice Action Group. Some organisations/individuals responded to more than one consultation paper.

ACROD National Industry Association for Disability Services

Adult Learning Australia (ALA)

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI)

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)

Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET)

Australian Education Union (AEU)

Business SA

Community Services and Health Industry Skills Board

DEET - Northern Territory Government

Department of Education and Training - WA (DET)

Equity Research Centre

Group Training Australia (GTA)

Innovation and Business Service Skills Australia (IBSA)

Leo B Akee - former member of Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council (AITAC)

Multicultural SA

Murwillumbah Community College

National Association of People Living with AIDS (NAPWA)

National Industry Association for Disability Services

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)

Ngaanyatjarra Council Aboriginal Corporation

NSW Service for the Treatment & Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)

Office of Post-Compulsory Education and Training (OPCET), Department of Education Tasmania

Pam Gill - former member of Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council (AITAC)

Peter Robertson, Learning Research and Design Department, Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE

TAFE Disability Network - Wodonga Institute of TAFE

TAFE SA Adelaide South

TAFE SA Program Leaders

TAFE SA Regional

TAFE SA Student Services Managers

Technical and Further Education Teachers Association of NSW (TAFE TA)

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI)

Jane Barrett, Tasmanian Regional Disability Liaison Officer, University of Tasmania

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)

Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE)

Victorian TAFE Disability Network (Compiled by Wodonga Institute of TAFE)