

# Reframing the Future Forums: 2007

## Continuous Improvement in VET

*A background paper on strategies for the continuous improvement of RTOs to enhance VET's human capital and to support AQTF 2007*

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This short paper provides a context for the 2007 forums on continuous improvement conducted by Reframing the Future.

The paper positions continuous improvement within the rich context of the national reform agenda and changes to the national training system.

The view of continuous improvement taken in this paper and in the forums is that it represents a commitment to quality, achieved through a mix of appropriate principles, attitudes, strategies and processes.

### **Background**

The 2007 forums are a timely response to the following critical developments for vocational education and training (VET):

- The Council of Australian Government's (COAG) aim of a responsive training system that supports the enhancement of Australia's human capital
- The National Quality Council's (NQC) initiation of changes such as the rationalisation of Training Packages, the promotion of recognition services, the introduction of skill sets and the assessing and reporting of employability skills
- the launch of the Australian Quality Training Framework 2007 (AQTF 2007) in July with its emphasis on continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is one of the four features underpinning the change and is an element within each of the three Essential Standards.

Each of the above developments requires training providers to undertake continuous improvement within their organisations and in their work with their clients.

### **Forum aims**

An integrated approach to continuous improvement by training providers is preferable to a piece meal approach. The forums provide an opportunity for registered training organisations (RTOs) to consider ways of implementing integrated responses to COAG's directions and the NQC's initiatives.

The specific aims of the forums are to:

- support the COAG goal of enhancing human capital, by focusing initially on the continuous improvement of the capabilities of the people within VET organisations – capabilities such as
  - forming and sustaining relationships with clients
  - assisting disengaged groups to re-engage with work and learning
  - assisting industry and enterprises with workforce development
- support the NQC aim of implementing AQTF 2007, especially the principle of continuous improvement in RTOs, in the context of current national priorities such as the use of rationalised Training Packages, RPL, skill sets and employability skills
- promote effective skill development of VET practitioners and change management in RTOs to support the continuous improvement of:
  - products and services
  - organisational plans, strategies, cultures, structures and processes
  - external relationships and networks that underpin workforce development.

### **Intended participants**

Participants will be key influencers on continuous improvement in their organisation, including:

- RTO middle to senior level managers, both educational and corporate
- RTO professional and organisational development managers
- RTO managers of teaching, learning and assessment
- Officers responsible for systemic quality and change.

### **Benefits of attending**

The forums are designed to:

- provide participants and their organisations with access to a set of proven methodologies that can support continuous improvement
- persuade participants that continuous improvement in RTOs will support the achievement of the aims of COAG and NQC and will benefit all clients.

### **Strategies matched to contexts**

There is no one way – no simple formula or silver bullet approach – to achieve continuous improvement: a RTO commonly will draw from a range of strategies and methodologies, to match their context and needs. In addition, any approach to continuous improvement requires rigour, commitment, and stamina.

Continuous improvement involves the continuous management of change. But just because we use the term continuous improvement, the change which is managed is not necessarily continuous. A steady even tempo is not the only mode of continuous improvement: it can involve bursts, peaks, breakthroughs, disruptions and varied pacing. As an example, Burnes (*Managing Change*, 2000, p.304) refers to Senior's three categories of change:

- *smooth incremental change*: covering slow, systemic, evolutionary change
- *bumpy incremental change*: where the smooth flow of change accelerates
- *discontinuous change*: when equilibrium is punctuated.

Burnes (2000, p.304) also provides this checklist of varieties of change, for individuals, groups and systems, and appropriate strategies to achieve each type of change.

**Table 1: Types of change and strategies to achieve each type of change**

	<b>Incremental change</b>	<b>Punctuated change</b>	<b>Continuous change</b>
<b>Individuals</b>	Learning	Promotion	Career development
<b>Groups</b>	Kaizen (*)	Team building	Changes in composition and tasks
<b>Systems</b>	Fine tuning	Business process re-engineering	Culture

(\*) Kaizen is defined by Burnes (p.145) as a Japanese approach to continuous improvement which includes creating a vision of the future and moving towards it in incremental steps, at all levels of the organisation.

In addition to change management strategies, RTOs need frameworks and tools for evaluation, to gauge the impact and progress of any continuous improvement. A range of approaches to evaluation will be promoted at the forums and are cited below.

### **Overview of Reframing the Future's *Set of Strategies***

At the forum Reframing the Future will introduce participants to a *Set of Strategies for Continuous Improvement*. The set will consist of:

- Strategies and methodologies to assist continuous improvement
- Monitoring and evaluation strategies to assist continuous improvement

### **Strategies and methodologies to assist continuous improvement**

Strategies and methodologies to be examined at the forums, and advocated as aids to continuous improvement for the VET workplace, include the following:

1. **For the individual VET practitioner:**
  - a. the active and conscious exercise of your professional judgment, with an emphasis on you building your confidence based on previous experience;
  - b. workbased learning methodology, with an emphasis on you undertaking reflection targeted at continuous improvement.
2. **For RTO work teams:** community of practice methodology, with an emphasis on you benefiting from social learning systems.
3. **For VET RTOs internally:**
  - a. change agency methodology, with an emphasis on you using your capacities for resilience, adaptability and energy;
  - b. change management methodology with an emphasis on you identifying the type(s) of change required, for example, incremental, disruptive or contingent, and developing continuous improvement strategies in response to this analysis.

- c. knowledge management methodology with an emphasis on you (1) generating new knowledge; and (2) converting knowledge into different forms.
4. **For RTOs externally:** industry training networking, with an emphasis on you balancing members' goals, intended outcomes and ongoing network dynamics.

All these strategies and methodologies are used, proven, refreshed and refined by Reframing the Future. At the forums these strategies and methodologies will be presented as a *Set of Strategies for Continuous Improvement* that you can access as needed.

### **Monitoring and evaluation strategies**

The impacts of any strategies designed to result in continuous improvement need to be monitored and evaluated. Hence, a feature of the forums will be the provision of frameworks and models for such monitoring and evaluation, including:

- clear definitions of key evaluation terminology such as objectives, outputs, outcomes and performance indicators. See also 'Users' Guide to the Essential Standards for Registration' p.4 for a focus on outcomes and a systematic approach.
- an examination of the meanings of continuous improvement. See for example *AQTF 07 Users' Guide*:

*An effective quality system includes processes that encourage and achieve continuous improvement. For RTOs this means developing a planned ongoing process to systematically review and improve policies, procedures, products and services through analysis of information and collection of data from clients and other interested parties, including RTO staff. Data from the quality indicators provides a key tool for continuous improvement.*

*The value for RTOs of adopting a continuous improvement cycle is its potential to create a stronger, more sustainable business that meets the needs of clients and stakeholders. Such a cycle also enables RTOs to adapt quickly to changing external environments such as economic factors and skills needs.*

- a four-level model for monitoring impacts: individual, group, organisation and system levels
- a six-step model for monitoring projects and activities designed to support continuous improvement.

### **Methodologies and activities at the forum**

The range of methodologies and activities used at the forums will be suitable for participants to use with your own colleagues within RTOs, when introducing them to the *Set of Strategies*.

***Appreciative Inquiry*** is the primary methodology underpinning the learning design of the 'Continuous Improvement in VET' Forums.

It is a methodology for influencing change that concentrates on the positives within an organisation. It is based on asking questions at four stages: discovery stage, dream stage, design stage and destiny stage.