

# **The *Equity Data Cube* – a web based information tool for the Department of Education and Training TAFE NSW**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper focuses on a web based reporting tool, the Equity Data Cube, developed for TAFE NSW equity teams. The tool assists personnel to extract the participation and completion rate data necessary for national and state reporting in a user friendly way via their institute web sites. The Pathways Conference presentation will primarily focus on a demonstration of the Equity Data Cube with time set aside for questions and an opportunity for a practical 'hands on' experience for participants.

## **Introduction:**

The Equity Data Cube (EDC) project was established in 2000 to develop a set of uniform electronic processes for collecting, comparing and disaggregating equity data for the NSW Department of Education and Training. The EDC was designed as a user-friendly intranet web based tool to assist equity personnel in TAFE NSW to report against such national and state initiatives as the:

- Australian National Training Authority's (ANTA) Blueprint for Vocational Education and Training (VET) *Bridging Pathways, the National Plan of Action for Increasing Opportunities for People with a Disability*
- ANTA's Blueprint for VET *Partners in a Learning Culture, Implementing the National Strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*
- TAFE NSW *Strategic Directions for Women*.
- *Ethnic Affairs Priority Statement*.

Timely access to equity data, and therefore the equity profile of students, was required to facilitate more effective reporting, planning, contextualised design and delivery of VET at both a systemic and local level. It was believed that access to an appropriate reporting tool would allow TAFE NSW personnel to be more responsive in offering programs which will benefit specific equity target groups and that equity teams would benefit from training in the use of the EDC.

## **Overview of the EDC:**

The EDC consists of a series of ‘dimensions’ of detailed equity data which has been taken from the enrolment forms provided by students. Dimensions include disability group, Aboriginality, gender, language background, if assistance has been requested, employment status, course information. An added advantage of the EDC is that it also contains total student numbers and total contact hours. In other words, it is not restricted to equity student numbers but has a much broader application.

Data is scanned in to the Student Course Information database and in turn is transferred to the EDC. Users can navigate their way around the EDC by adding filters and/or by drilling up and down through dimensions to extract information for reporting purposes.

The EDC can for example, extract such detailed data as the number of Aboriginal women with a disability studying in a particular course at a particular campus. Information can be presented as text or as graphs or charts and can then be saved as Excel or PDF files (refer to **TAB A** for example).

### **Implementation:**

Information to determine current data collection methods and to gauge interest in training was collected through two sources – consultations and a questionnaire.

1. The project officer conducted face to face and electronic consultations with equity teams across TAFE NSW Institutes. This provided a clear picture of local data collection methods, and highlighted the difficulties and differences faced by personnel in gaining access to reliable, consistent data in the NSW TAFE sector.
2. A questionnaire was developed in order to gain a broader perspective of the complexities of equity data collection and to formally collate the relevant information. The questionnaire asked for the following:
  - current data collection methods
  - designated staff members responsible for data collection
  - difficulties encountered with completion of enrolment forms
  - reasons for data collection (ie for state and national reporting)
  - possible benefits from on-site training in the use of the EDC.

The questionnaire was provided to all TAFE NSW institutes, the Open Training and Education Network – Distance Education (OTEN - DE) and the relevant managers responsible for equity provision at a state office level.

### **Results:**

Initial findings from the consultations and questionnaire indicated that:

- there were variations in current equity data collection across TAFE NSW

- there was no shared understanding on how equity data can be used to report against national and state initiatives
- students experienced difficulties with completion of enrolment forms and
- there was a strong desire for training in the effective use of the EDC.

Findings re-affirmed the important role personnel have in implementing uniform processes for capturing reliable, accurate student information. In addition to this, personnel reported geographical isolation and the size of TAFE NSW institutes often compounded the difficulties associated with streamlining reporting processes. The feedback also highlighted concerns in relation to the design of student enrolment forms and the consequent inaccuracy of the raw data being collected.

Consultations at institutes and the questionnaire results indicated that there are ongoing difficulties with the student enrolment forms for students from each of the equity groups. It also became apparent that there is a disparity between the number of students who identify their equity group on the enrolment form and the number who receive support through the various equity consultants.

#### *Changes to Enrolment Forms*

Meetings with the TAFE NSW enrolment form working party in 2001 and 2002 (which included the EDC project officer), resulted in the following changes to the enrolment forms:

- inclusion of a separate *Privacy Statement* emphasising student confidentiality to encourage more accurate data collection at the point of enrolment
- more detailed questions about disability support, language background other than English and child care requirements
- the possibility of an ‘equity adjustment’ form being offered to students post-enrolment to address the disparity issue between self-disclosure and the provision of support.

#### *Equity Data Cube Training*

Respondents welcomed the prospect of on-site EDC training at a local level. To date results from the training evaluation have been positive and indicate a need for this to be provided on an ongoing basis. There are plans for follow-up training to enable frequent users to gain a more detailed insight into the EDC.

#### **Discussion:**

The state-wide consultations indicated that the role of institute personnel is critical to the development of uniform procedures related to the efficient and reliable collection of data. The implementation of these procedures through the EDC project has assisted in providing a reliable basis by which comparisons across and between equity groups can be provided. Monitoring the participation rates of students from equity groups is also an ANTA requirement and is a key

performance indicator of the NSW Department of Education and Training's *Disability Action Plan* and the TAFE NSW *Strategic Directions for Women*.

Furthermore the EDC has proved itself to be a time efficient reporting tool. Data is updated on a weekly basis so that equity teams no longer have to rely on their institute educational planning teams to retrieve participation rate information.

### **Conclusion:**

As a result of ongoing evaluations the EDC is currently undergoing a review as it became apparent that to streamline EDC usage, a number of adjustments needed to be carried out. These developments will include:

- the addition of module and course completion rates
- TAFE NSW Institute specific EDCs which will assist with 'web traffic' problems and
- a condensed Data Cube for general use that is not equity specific.

The EDC continues to be widely used across TAFE NSW by equity teams and also by educational planning teams who find the inclusion of total student numbers and total contact hour data extremely useful. Future plans resulting from the EDC project include a study focussing on post-TAFE destinations for students with disabilities as well as a statewide campaign to promote the completion of equity details at enrolment.

Using the EDC has had the considerable benefit of enabling institutes to respond to the 'compound nature' of disadvantage experienced by students from equity groups by easy access to relevant data. Data from the EDC has also assisted in highlighting the need for the continual review of resources and funding associated with support provision for this cohort.