**Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET)**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Australian Disability Clearing House on Education and Training (ADCET) provides up to date and comprehensive information about inclusive teaching, learning and assessment strategies, accommodations and support services for people with disabilities in post secondary education and training. ADCET services primarily target teachers, disability practitioners, learning support staff, researchers and policy makers.

The workshop will report on an evaluation of ADCET services and draw on participants’ expertise to discuss strategies for developing the services provided by ADCET for the benefit of practitioners and researchers within the post-compulsory education sector.

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## BACKGROUND

This project, funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) completed the development of the National Clearinghouse on Education and Training for people with disabilities (NCET). In doing so the name of the clearinghouse was changed to the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET).

Universities and the VET sector have devoted considerable effort to the development and funding of services that best meet the needs of students with disabilities. Some very successful strategies, programs and resources that address the needs of these students have been developed, many funded by the Commonwealth government through programs such as the Cooperative and Disability Initiatives Programme (DIP) projects grants. However equity/disability practitioners and students in individual institutions are often isolated from each other and have limited access to knowledge about effective strategies, successful programs and research findings. The Austed listserv is very useful in providing a forum for discussion of current issues but the knowledge that flows through this medium is not collated and made available to others who may benefit from it later. Conferences provide an opportunity for sharing of information and ideas but these occur irregularly. There is only limited sharing of information among related fields such as student equity, disability support and equal employment opportunity.

## ADCET HISTORY

The Department of Education, Science and Training (formerly the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs) granted $75,000 in 1999 and $120,000 in 2000 for the establishment of NCET under the Disability Initiatives Programme (DIP). Deakin University hosted the NCET project but NCETs funding ceased at the completion of that project phase in June 2001. In November 2001, the Director of NCET, Ms Gillian Bruce, prepared a final report on the clearinghouse (Appendix A) that identified the following achievements over NCETs 21 months of operation:

* NCET established a website (NCET On-line), launched in September 2000;
* materials were commissioned and gathered …and were made available; and
* NCET hosted the austed listserv to facilitate discussion and the sharing of ideas by disability practitioners, and developed a set of protocols for its use.

The report also stated that the final objective of achieving long-term financial viability was not met. Disability practitioners did not make significant use of NCETs services, which the final report attributed to a lack of early market research.

In September 2002 DEST invited tender applications for the completion of the NCET project. A tender from the University of Tasmania was accepted and the University was also selected to host the clearinghouse.

**ESTABLISHMENT OF ADCET**

The clearinghouse web site was based on a relational database which enhances administration and updating of information; searching by users and accessibility of the content. Information has been added to the database through a web-based interface with minimal HTML coding. The menu structure has been designed to be easy to use and is fully accessible to users with disabilities. Content has been organised into Fact Sheets, Frequently Asked Questions, News/Events, Resources/Articles and Links and includes keyword search options to facilitate access by users. The categories can be added to or changed in response to the changing needs of practitioners. The web site was allocated a *.edu* suffix domain name which enhances its credibility within the education and training sector.

Early in September 2002 the test site was established in order to conduct useability testing and finalise interface design. A consultant was contracted to evaluate the accessibility of the site against W3C standards and to advise regarding guidelines for any further developments. Her report was positive and her recommendations were implemented to enable the site to be fully compliant with W3C standards.

The site was officially launched on International Day of People with Disabilities on December 3 2003. Since then all users have had free access to all information and resources but have been required to register with the site. This has allowed monitoring of usage and enabled a comprehensive evaluation to be conducted. Since the launch of ADCET there have been over 1500 user registrations.

In the absence of ongoing government funding, a subscription process has been developed to provide for the ongoing financial sustainability of the Clearinghouse**.** The steering committee determined that sufficient annual income would be achieved through subscriptions from institutions and individuals to operate the service at a basic level. Any additional income obtained through sponsorship or other fundraising would enable services to be further developed.

## EVALUATION

The project team designed and implemented a survey of all registered users to investigate user satisfaction levels and to identify opportunities for improving services. The survey instrument also provided information about who uses ADCET, how often, their plans for future usage and their impressions of the content in the Clearinghouse. The questions were kept as brief and succinct as possible to ensure recipients were not deterred by a lengthy and time consuming survey. Survey participants were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in response to each of the questions. A sample of 682 registered users were emailed with responses received from150. This is a response rate of 22% which is considered high for this type of survey. A summary of the results is presented below.

## Distribution of responses by sector of user

As can be seen in graph 2.1, 30% of respondents were from the Higher Education Sector, whilst 24 % came from the VET sector and 11% worked across sectors. The 12% from the secondary sector was surprising given that the service had not been targeted or promoted to this sector.

Distribution of responses by role of user Distribution of responses by sector of user

# Distribution of responses by role of user

35% of respondents were practitioners with 26% of responses received from teachers. 23% of respondents classified as ‘other’. Some examples of ‘other’ were identified as; university administrators, managers, parents and student advocacy workers.

By comparing data across sectors it was found that 68% of Higher Education respondents were practitioners whilst in VET the corresponding figure was only 24%. The results for the teacher role was reversed with only 7% of Higher Education respondents identifying as teachers compared with 32% of VET respondents. 72% of secondary respondents were teachers

The numbers of students using the site was very low, understandably in light of the fact that the survey was conducted during the examination /summer break period and that the site does not target and had not been promoted to students.

# Frequency of Use

40% of users had accessed the site more than 3 times. These users were more likely to be practitioners and were more likely to both value the site highly and anticipate using the site more frequently in the future.

# Frequency of Future Use

Almost 50% of users anticipated that they would be regular users of the site. As discussed above these users were more likely to be practitioners and were more likely to value the site highly. It is significant that over 98% of users anticipated using the service at least occasionally into the future.

# Useability

The question related to useability indicated a high level of satisfaction with the structure and navigation of the site. Features and content were valued highly but users were divided regarding the value of the profile filtering function.

# Overall Impression

The overall impression that users had was overwhelmingly positive with 97% of users rating the site as useful or very useful

# QUALITATIVE COMMENTS

* *I'm impressed – a very valuable site.*
* *A very well designed website that is useful for research*
* *Although extremely useful resource, will not be able to pay for membership*
* *Excellent website*
* *This will be a very useful site to visit to assist with maintaining currency*
* *Very well designed site, easy to navigate and search.*
* *You are doing a great job and I am sure it will just keep getting better.*
* *May be interesting to get regular emails advising of updates of new topics etc. which would encourage me to keep going back to the site*
* *An excellent site with information well presented.*
* *It would good to bring all RDLO resources together as info is not accessible*
* *Great facility. I use it regularly - just keep up the great work.*
* *Now that I have made the connection I will use the site more.*
* *My only concern is the sustainability issues - if DEST does not continue to fund this initiative it will likely meet the same fate as NCET.*
* *I found ADCET to be one of the best resources that I have come across for myself and for passing on to relevant others. Please keep it going!*
* *Just that this is an excellent resource for accessing information and assistance to improve my customer service to the community*
* *My only problem is I don't have enough time to visit this site more often.*
* *Particularly like access to latest news and info on technology as usually we only hear about those things we need at the time.*

# DISCUSSION

Since its inception NCET has had a higher profile in the Higher Education sector and thus it was to be expected that the majority of users were from this sector. As the service is better known by practitioners within the Higher Education sector and that these users have been targeted in the promotion of ADCET, it is not surprising that these users comprise a high proportion of users from this sector. However the fact that a quarter of users were from the VET sector is significant as very little promotion had been directed towards this sector. Similarly the high proportion of VET teachers using the service warrants further investigation.

The 12% useage by the secondary sector was also surprising given that the service had not been targeted or promoted to this sector. Further analysis indicates that many of these users are based in Queensland and may be involved in VET in schools programs. This also warrants further investigation.

# CONCLUSIONS

The encouraging results of this evaluation and especially the very high satisfaction rates indicate that to date ADCET has so far been successful in achieving its goals. The project team have recently successfully tendered for related projects which are built around the same database and include ongoing revenue streams.

In response to suggestions received through the evaluation a regular newsletter is now being distributed to users to update them as to new resources and information on the site, the filter function has been discontinued and the site has been redesigned to enhance useability. The redesigned site will be launched early in November along at the same time as subscriptions are introduced. To date (October 2004) responses to the invitation to users to subscribe has been encouraging and the ADCET team are cautiously optimistic about the longer term sustainability of the service. The team looks forward to receiving constructive feedback through the workshop which will assist in the further development of ADCET services.