

National Forum on the Role and Support Structures for School Laboratory Technicians in Australian Secondary Schools

Briefing Paper

Introduction

A National Forum on the Role and Support Structures for School Laboratory Technicians in Australian Secondary Schools, funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) was held at the Mercure Hotel Sydney on Thursday 8 July 2010.

The purposes of this forum were to;

- increase awareness within education sectors of issues and challenges facing the training and support of school science and technology technicians,
- establish a commitment to developing guidelines for minimum standards of training and induction of school technicians and for servicing levels, and
- come to an agreement to pursue the establishment of a national online advisory service for school science and technology.

A range of national stakeholders and jurisdictional representatives were present at the forum, which could be attended by invitation only. A list of participants is attached as Appendix 1.

Background

Science Education Technicians Australia (SETA) has been formed to support laboratory technicians to develop a national voice on issues pertaining to the support of science teaching and learning in school science laboratories.

One of the determinations of SETA was to demonstrate the critical importance of science laboratory technicians in Australian schools, but research evidence was lacking to back this notion. A survey was therefore developed and was funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as a quality teacher initiative under the Boosting Innovation, Science, Technology and Mathematics Teaching Programme.

The resulting study was conducted by researchers at Edith Cowan University, led by Professor Mark Hackling, in collaboration with the Australian Science Teachers Association and Science Education Technicians Australia.

An Executive Summary of the report, *The Status of School Science Laboratory Technicians in Australian Secondary Schools*, is attached as Appendix 2.

The Australian Science Teachers Association (ASTA) and SETA investigated ways in which to disseminate the findings of this report and to promulgate its recommendations to promote further action. It was therefore decided to hold a national forum of key stakeholders. Funding was sought and granted from DEEWR to conduct the forum in Sydney on 8 July 2010.

Comment

At the national forum, there were a number of high-profile issues discussed, as they relate to school science laboratory technicians. In brief summary they were;

- *Implications for National Curriculum in Science* – It was recognised that effective implementation of a more inquiry oriented Australian science curriculum will require high quality technical support

- *Training* – Laboratory technician training is not geared around work in school science but for medical or industrial applications. There is limited access to on-going professional learning once laboratory technicians are appointed resulting in many feeling ill-equipped to deal with common procedures in schools. This has safety and curriculum ramifications at the very least.
- *Recruitment* – There is a mismatch between duties and salaries which has had a negative impact on recruitment. Raising the standards of laboratory technicians and ensuring that the job is clear in what it demands of aspirants, will increase the capacity of laboratory technicians to meet the needs of schools and the demands of the new Australian Curriculum.
- *Standards* – There are no nationally consistent minimum standards for training for laboratory technicians. Clear roles and job descriptions for laboratory technicians, again with national consistency, are urgently required. These should be embedded into the standards.
- *Support* – School laboratory technicians do not have access to reliable and nationally consistent technical advice in order to support science curriculum at an appropriate level. This raises OHS and risk management concerns. A national online advisory service, for which there was considerable support, would remedy this issue.

Representatives of training organisations also provided outlines of the various courses and programs being offered by them and possible developments of these in the future.

It was clear that the meeting was in support of moving forward on this issue of developing clearer roles and support structures for school laboratory technicians in Australian schools. To this end it was resolved to;

- Raise awareness by the education sectors of the issues and challenges facing the training and support of school science and technology technicians.
- Commit to developing guidelines for minimum standards of training for school science technicians, and for service levels through the establishment of a Working Party to draft role descriptions and minimum standards.
- Pursue the establishment of a national online advisory service for school science and technology through the establishment of a second Working Party which will establish a strategy to achieve this.

Recommendations

That jurisdictions and other key stakeholders in the employment and training of school science laboratory technicians,

1. support school science laboratory technicians in our schools as a matter of priority,
2. engage with SETA and ASTA to further develop dialogue around the issues facing school science laboratory technicians,
3. support the notion of consistent minimum standards for school science laboratory technicians,
4. support the development and maintenance of an online advisory service for school science laboratory technicians.

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