

We can't teach them that!

Reinstating the place of generic skills in VET

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Abstract

In a number of overseas countries, the delivery and assessment of generic skills has become an issue of considerable interest. Likewise, in Australia there has been an increasingly obvious shift by vocational education and training (VET) policy makers and major industry representatives, away from a complete focus on technical competencies to one that promotes an enhanced positioning for generic skills in VET. In their simplest form, generic skills are currently represented in Training Packages and in practitioners' minds, by the Mayer Key Competencies. However, research indicates that the teaching and assessment of Key Competencies is relatively problematic. Learners' achievement of Key Competencies is generally inferred, and is only rarely directly delivered and evaluated. This paper reports on a series of case studies of RTO approaches to assessment of generic skills. It examines the issues and concerns raised by practitioners currently engaged in the delivery and assessment of generic skills and offers some suggestions for supporting more effective approaches in a range of VET environments.

Introduction

Generic skills may be said to be enjoying a revival in Australian vocational education and training, where they are currently the subject of much research interest and popular discussion. In the early 1990s, employment-related 'Key Competencies' (Mayer, 1992) were articulated in Australia. Meanwhile, studies in the USA identified 'workplace know-how' as 'necessary skills' (SCANS, 1991), 'key skills' began to be talked about in Britain (Kelly, 2001) and 'essential skills' were identified in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1993). More recently, a recurring concern with these key competencies in both Europe and Australia has become evident in the significant projects conducted in both regions into the nature of 'employability skills' (ACCI & BCA, 2002; OECD, 2000). These projects suggest that it is time once again to place a greater emphasis on generic skills within the training process.

Methodology

The research on which this paper reports was designed to investigate the nature of generic skills as they are commonly defined and understood in the Australian VET context and to explore the ways in which practitioners are incorporating the assessment and certification of generic skills into their programs (Clayton et al, in press). At the same time, it sought to determine the critical elements of effective assessment of generic skills and to discuss the implications for the VET sector of an increased emphasis on generic skills.

After a review of literature on the assessment and certification of generic skills, and a desktop audit to establish the place of generic skills in Training Packages, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 teachers/trainers and managers of assessment and six learners from seven Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). These RTOs provide a snapshot of the diversity of VET delivery in Australia.

Centrelink, a large Commonwealth government agency with a significant enterprise-based training system, delivers training totally on the job. Electronics and Information Technology at Torrens Valley TAFE delivers training almost entirely off the job. Community Services and Health at Spencer TAFE and the Burnley College Campus of the University of Melbourne are located within large public RTOs who deliver both on and off the job. The Campaspe College of Adult Education (CCAЕ) is a rural community-based Adult Community Education (ACE) training provider. Two colleges delivering VET in Schools programs within the ACT Senior Secondary sector also participated in the study.

The informants to the study were working with a range of Training Packages: Business Services and Telecommunications (Call Centres Sector), Electrotechnology Industry, Horticulture, Hospitality, Tourism, Information Technology, Retail Operations, Business and Community Services (Children's Services); and with various VET in Schools programs and a Diploma of Community Services (Children's Services). The informants were all at different stages in the development of their approaches to generic skills. The study focused on Key Competencies because that is the form in which generic skills are represented in Training Packages, but informants' understanding of broader concepts of generic skills (implicit in many units of competency) was also explored.

The research findings provided indicative information about the incorporation of generic skills in Training Packages, the extent of practitioner understanding of generic skills and the ways in which they assess and certify them. The findings also gave a glimpse of learners' views of the utility of generic skills. The research highlighted those factors which practitioners themselves identified as being critical in generic skills assessment. Finally, the study looked at the implications of these outcomes for vocational education and training in Australia, and considered a number of strategies that would raise the profile and valuing of generic skills.

Understanding generic skills

There is fairly universal agreement regarding the importance of the role of generic skills for the new 'knowledge worker' in the literature (Mayer, 1992; Senate Committee, 2000) and in the field. However, practitioners do not speak, or think, about generic skills in the same terms. This is not surprising, given that the language associated with the concept of generic skills is quite complex and that there is no real agreement as to what constitutes these skills, let alone how to validly and reliably recognise them in practice.

This study found that most practitioners were familiar with the Key Competencies, and that they understood the concept of generic skills, although they may not have used the same terms when talking about them. Generally, generic skills were understood to be any skills that learners need for lifelong learning and living. Those

informants who had actively worked to develop a thorough understanding of Key Competencies and how they might be applied in a training and assessment situation were much more comfortable with both the language and the concept.

Practitioners talked about generic skills as ‘work readiness’, encompassing personal values, attitudes, attributes and qualities, self management, work management, industry awareness, customer service, and responsibility for own learning. Their opinions regarding these skills tended to be informed by personal perspectives rather than by formal policies or guidelines.

Valuing generic skills

Despite the diversity of opinions as to their applicability and terms in which they were discussed, generic skills were highly valued by all informants. Whilst some literature questions the transferable nature of generic skills (Cornford, 2001; Stevenson, 1999), the informants were broadly convinced that it is in their transferability that the value of generic skills lies. Generic skills were seen to be critical to the effective performance of vocational tasks and crucial to lifelong learning.

There was less certainty amongst informants about how generic skills are valued by employers and industry. Some suggested that they are undervalued, whilst others contended that they are valued, but are simply not known as ‘generic skills.’ Furthermore, there was a strong sense that while employers can and do provide technical skill development; they are reluctant or unable to take on the task of building the generic skills of their employees. Thus, there is an imperative for practitioners to ensure that generic skills are included in the training that they provide.

In those industries in which generic skills are highly valued, they are increasingly regarded as being as necessary as technical skills (Dawe, 2002). However, some informants considered that the lack of clear definition hampered the promotion of these skills to industry, employers and employees. Not only is there a need to promote the vocational relevance of generic skills, this promotion needs to be tailored to specific industries and individual enterprises.

Ironically, while it is in their very generalisability that the greatest strength of generic skills lies, it is also there that they are most vulnerable to dismissal by those enterprises which cannot see an immediate benefit to themselves in the development of their employees’ generic skills. It is not impossible to convince such workplaces of the value of generic skills, but their promotion must be both specific and clear.

Incorporation of generic skills in Training Packages

The audit of Training Packages conducted in this study showed that generic skills are incorporated in a range of ways. Apart from the Key Competencies, which are included in tabular form in every Unit of Competency, generic skills are also included as discrete Units of Competency, as elements of competency, and as performance criteria. They are also embedded within vocational Units of Competency. Sometimes they appear explicitly in performance criteria and elsewhere they can only be implied. This variation in coverage within Training Packages has a direct and sometimes

negative bearing on practitioner understanding of generic skills, and the approaches they take to assess them.

There was a common view among informants that Key Competencies are not clearly described in Training Packages and that more global generic skills are even more difficult to identify. While awareness of Key Competencies was quite high, many practitioners were unclear about their implications or how to interpret them. Where generic skills are represented as discrete Units of Competency or performance criteria, practitioners had little difficulty in teaching and assessing them. When they are embedded in Units of Competency they cause more concern because learner achievement of them must be inferred. Valid inference requires clear guidance and currently the Assessment Guidelines within Training Packages provide inadequate support for practitioners in this area.

Informants indicated that they assess particular generic skills that they consider important for their discipline areas, or which they see as being a fundamental part of learners' work readiness, despite feeling constrained by the lack of clear direction within their Training Packages. They recognised that there is risk involved in conducting assessments that could be challenged by learners because the generic skills performance criteria are not explicitly identified within Training Package documentation.

It should be stressed that most informants were commenting on their experiences in delivering the first versions of their Training Packages. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) has developed comprehensive guidelines to ensure that Key Competencies are more explicitly incorporated into new and revised Training Packages (ANTA, 2001). Thus this issue has, in part, already been addressed for those developing Training Packages. However, clearly, more extensive and specific guidance on the delivery and assessment of generic skills is required by practitioners.

Assessment of generic skills

Central to this study was the exploration of those factors which practitioners identified as being critical in the assessment of generic skills. These factors are very similar to those habitually raised by practitioners discussing competency based assessment in general, and do not constitute anything unique to the assessment of generic skills.

Because Key Competencies have been included in Training Packages from the outset, this study was concerned to determine how practitioners are delivering and assessing them. Generally, generic skills are not being directly assessed unless they are discrete Units of Competency. In most cases, the Key Competencies are being integrated into other competencies. They are being assessed holistically as part of the overall assessment of vocational competencies and their achievement inferred. Thus, because generic skills are less explicitly described in Training Packages, there is considerable potential for invalid judgements to be made about the quality of learner performance. For example, one informant noted that because Key Competencies are embedded in Training Packages, some practitioners wrongly assume that they can be inferred as being achieved by mere completion of training.

A number of informants also indicated that they found determining what performance looks like at each of the three Key Competency levels quite problematic. The study found only one instance in which the Key Competencies were being directly assessed and reported on, using a set of agreed benchmarks of performance for each of the three Mayer Key Competency levels. In that case, opportunities for the assessment of Key Competencies were identified within real work tasks generated out of vocational Units of Competency. Even though the Key Competencies were not assessed separately, judgements about their achievement were explicit. Learners were provided with clear guidelines on the evidence required to be assessed at each level, and were actively encouraged to determine their own readiness for that assessment.

Importantly, these learners were working in a flexible learning environment in which they had a choice about what they learned, the resources that they used and the modes of delivery that they selected. In this learner-centred setting they could also choose to have their achievement of the generic competencies recognised through formal assessment and certification. The methods of assessment and the evidence requirements for individual learners were determined after a process of mentoring and negotiation with teaching staff. Importantly, the performance criteria for each competency at each level were open and transparent to both students and teachers.

One large Enterprise RTO had developed a training system that ensured that staff acquired generic skills during their on-job training. Their assessors had a good knowledge of generic skills, especially the Mayer Key Competencies, which they used as a base on which to build the incorporation of enterprise-specific generic skills into training. Some informants from large public RTOs were addressing broader generic skills by formulating their own sets of what they called ‘core competencies’ or ‘professional skills.’ They tended to infer the achievement of these skills from performance in vocational activities.

Problematic aspects of generic skills assessment

Given that informants to the study expressed concern about the lack of clarity in describing generic skills in Training Packages, and the lack of guidance on how to assess them, it is not surprising that they called for better information to support assessment decision making. For example, informants suggested that guidelines for evidence collection, including the delineation of performance requirements or benchmarks, should be developed to ensure consistency across assessors and across and between RTOs.

The study noted that some such support is provided in the Training Package Development Handbook, which addresses the implicitly recognised difficulties that Training Package developers can have in the identification, teaching and assessment of the Key Competencies. The handbook suggests developing inclusive performance criteria, and range statements, specifying a variety of evidence, writing holistic units of competency, and using appropriate language (ANTA, 2001). If this advice were more broadly disseminated to teachers and trainers who share the above-mentioned conceptual and practical difficulties, there might be fewer problems with generic skills in the field.

However, the ‘conscious and deliberate effort’ which is required to make Key Competencies explicit throughout the training process is obviously predicated on a sound understanding on the teacher’s or trainer’s part, not only of the nature of Key Competencies themselves, but of the multitude of ways in which their achievement can be facilitated. The handbook can only go so far in suggesting strategies and supporting them with examples. Beyond this, teachers and trainers must exercise their own professional competencies.

Informants consistently commented that specific resources and funding need to be dedicated to the assessment of generic skills to enable it to be done properly. They see that delivery and assessment have to be flexible to ensure that there are many opportunities for learners to be assessed in their achievement of generic skills.

Many informants identified the importance of the learner’s role in generic skills learning and assessment, and some placed considerable emphasis on providing well designed, clearly articulated, comprehensive and readily accessible information to learners, assessors, employers and other stakeholders. Such information can raise levels of awareness of generic skills and result in a greater level of commitment by learners and teachers to the recognition of these skills.

Collaboration with other assessors has proven to be important in the development of assessment strategies for generic skills. In some instances, with limited guidelines to follow, practitioners have adopted this strategy in order to gain a degree of consistency in their assessment approach and judgements. In other instances, assessors have developed clear guidelines, performance benchmarks and assessment matrices to assist in consistent decision making.

In most instances there has been no parallel development of guidelines for learners on the assessment of their generic skills; instead, more emphasis has been placed on providing information of a more general nature on assessment. However, quality information on the assessment of generic skills, together with ongoing support for learners, can have a significant impact.

Reporting and certifying generic skills

While there is no national policy that requires RTOs to formally record, report and certify generic skills there is little likelihood that training providers will actively seek to do so. The Enterprise RTO in this study recorded the attainment of generic skills on their assessment matrices, but none of the other RTOs had formal strategies in place to include generic skills in their formal records of learner achievement. A considerable amount of generic skills assessment, therefore, is going unreported where those skills are being inferred but not recorded, reported or certified. As the New Zealand Qualifications Authority has observed, ‘If the essential skills are not separately reported it is unlikely that they will have widespread recognition’ (NZQA 1993, p.14).

The major disincentive for the recording, reporting and certifying of generic skills in every RTO is that it requires them to have a student management system capable of handling the multitude of results that would be generated. Further, given the current systems of fee payment in place within RTOs, the development of explicit generic Units of Competency would have considerable financial implications for learners,

which they may be unwilling to bear. However, not only would learners be more motivated to acquire generic skills if they were formally certified, it would assist employers if learners' attainment of these skills were more clearly described.

Learner perspectives on generic skills

Despite the diverse learning environments and the different approaches to the delivery and assessment of generic skills in which these learners found themselves, all were able to describe generic skills in their broadest terms, and valued them very highly. It therefore would seem appropriate to assume that raising the profile of generic skills in the delivery of VET programs to a level where they are explicitly addressed, assessed and understood by learners should not be too difficult a task. It is evident, however, that the provision of quality information that clarifies the behaviours and forms of evidence required is as essential for learners as it is for teachers and trainers.

Critical factors in generic skills assessment

Generally, the critical factors in generic skills assessment are no different from those required for any valid, reliable, flexible and fair assessment. However, because generic skills are less explicitly described in Training Packages and Key Competency levels are difficult to determine, there is considerable potential for invalid judgements to be made about the quality of learner performance. Naturally, it is crucial that assessors themselves understand what generic skills are and know how they might be manifested in behaviour. Without such understanding, it is impossible that effective delivery and assessment can occur.

Practitioners expressed disparate views about the place and the agency of learners in the assessment process. A number of informants suggested that assessment of these skills should be subtle so that learners do not have the feeling that this is an increased burden upon their learning of vocational skills. Others, however, considered that it is crucial that learners should be at the centre of the learning and assessment of generic skills and that they have a significant role in the ultimate assessment decision making. In particular, these informants saw the development of the learners' ability to self-assess generic skills as critical, for this is the key generic skill that they need to ensure their employment and continued employability. It has also been noted in the literature that transferability is best facilitated when learners are explicitly taught strategies for enhancing transfer (Misko, 1995; Tennant, 1999).

Some practitioners place considerable emphasis on the quality of information that is provided to learners, assessors, employers and other users of the assessment outcomes. Information to support assessment decision making, such as guidelines for evidence collection, which includes the delineation of performance requirements or benchmarks, must be developed to ensure consistency across assessors and across and between RTOs. This information needs to be well designed, clearly articulated, comprehensive, pitched at an appropriate level for the users, and readily accessible. Evidence from this study indicates that where considerable effort has been put into the provision of quality information, levels of awareness of generic skills have been raised and there has been a greater level of commitment by learners and practitioners to the recognition of these skills.

It is important that learners be assisted to recognise the multiple opportunities they have for assessment of generic skills. This requires not only learners but also practitioners to have a good understanding of where generic skills are located in the learning process and encouraging learners to have these skills recognised. Delivery and assessment must be sufficiently flexible to ensure that these opportunities can be readily accessed. A number of informants stressed that where learners are undertaking their programs in flexible learning mode, the building of their generic skills is essential for success. Self-directedness, motivation and the ability to organise themselves and the material they are learning are crucial skills in such environments.

Information gathered in this study indicates that an integrated approach is the preferred mode for assessing generic skills; that is, an approach in which technical or vocational competencies and generic skills are assessed together in the context of whole work tasks. Informants suggested that the development of a fully-fledged system for the collection of evidence (which might comprise competency records books, checklists, etc) is essential for the effective assessment of generic skills. Many of them expressed some frustration that these systems have not yet been fully developed within their organisations.

In addition, informants acknowledged the importance of quality assuring the processes, the assessment tools and the decisions that they make about learner competence. Some expressed a level of concern about being able to check their assessment processes and outcomes against those of others. Working in isolation without any idea about how other people are going about the same process means practitioners are not making confident decisions about competence. Strategies to review, compare and adapt assessment would assist them in developing valid and consistent approaches as would clear delineation of evidence requirements and benchmarks.

Informants agreed that effective assessment of generic skills required resourcing. Several RTOs in this study have made considerable commitment to the development of comprehensive approaches for assessing generic skills, because they are intrinsically linked to their organisational mission and values. The provision of time and space for people to be involved in working through the issues has been identified as vitally important, as has the need for professional development for staff after strategies have been developed. The active involvement of key players in the development, implementation and review processes are crucial to effective delivery and assessment of generic skills.

There was also some suggestion that without national policy that supports appropriate resourcing of the assessment of generic skills together with national strategies for certification, the acceptance of generic skills would remain problematic. This is particularly the case where generic skills are being inferred and go unreported.

Implications of findings for Australian VET

Any future strategy designed to extend the introduction, assessment and certification of generic skills in vocational education and training programs must take into account the uneven manner in which Key Competencies have been implemented since the introduction of Training Packages. Inconsistencies of approach and uncertainties

about interpretation combined with a stress on inference of competence, rather than direct assessment of achievement of competence, has meant that Key Competencies have remained relatively undervalued by learners and employers.

There is a need to raise the profile of generic skills within the Australian VET system. This could, in part, be achieved by reframing current VET policy to give them a more prominent place. The policy would need to include a clear definition of what generic skills are meant to encompass, taking into account the findings of the range of current research on the topic. The positioning of generic skills could then be further enhanced by the development of policy to provide practitioners with clear direction on which generic skills should be delivered and assessed and a framework within which they could be reported and certified.

Any formal certification of these skills would require RTOs to be able to manage and report upon the results. Student information management systems, record keeping strategies and policies would need to be modified and funding would need to be allocated for this purpose. Alternatively, a record keeping system for generic skills could be centrally developed and made available for use by interested providers.

For generic skills to be further accepted as a critical component of training, they must be actively promoted as valuable competencies to achieve. Such promotion should be comprehensive and directed at all key stakeholders: employers, industry, learners and VET practitioners.

Any promotional strategies directed at employers and industry will have to take into account the current confusion of views about generic skills and the language surrounding them. Messages about the nature and value of generic skills are needed to educate these key players. To be effective, these messages would need to be specifically targeted to meet the unique interests and needs of each stakeholder group, recognising that this is not a situation in which 'one size fits all'.

Motivating learners to actively engage in acquiring generic skills requires the skills to be openly taught and assessed in ways that treat them as having equal value to technical skills. In parallel with this, consideration must also be given to officially valuing them through formal certification. One option would be the development of a form of certification for generic skills that is separate from the current arrangements for the certification of vocational competency. The issue of how this could be made cost neutral to learners would also have to be addressed because learners are unlikely to elect to be assessed for competence in generic skills if they are required to pay extra for them.

To assist in motivating practitioners, there is a clear need to revise the way that generic skills are dealt with in Training Packages. Any revision should ensure that the place of generic skills is made much more explicit. The extent to which generic skills should be embedded into units of vocational skills or alternatively included as discrete competencies requires resolution. Additionally, considerable benefits would be gained by ensuring that generic skills are incorporated into Training Packages in ways that are easy for practitioners to interpret and which minimise the possibility of inconsistent outcomes in their assessment.

The explicit incorporation of generic skills into performance criteria would increase the degree of confidence that practitioners have in assessing them. More extensive advice on how they could be assessed would also be of considerable help. Models of good assessment practice, exemplar and benchmark materials, strategies for consistent assessment decision-making, options for record keeping and guidelines for the development of information on generic skills assessment for practitioners and learners would encourage practitioners to actively and validly assess generic skills. As indicated by Mayer (Mayer, 1992), and reiterated by several studies since (Dawe, 2002; Down, 2000; Down & Figgis, 2000; Kearns, 2001; Moy, 1999), professional development opportunities would need to be offered in association with the introduction of such resources, as VET practitioners need to develop the additional subject matter expertise that is essential to the effective delivery and assessment of generic skills.

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