Key Competencies in Training Packages

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This paper reports on the recent research project, funded by the Australian National Training Authority, to determine how effectively, or otherwise, the Key Competencies are being integrated within Training Package specifications.

The research used interviews, focus groups and questionnaires to obtain the views of Training Package developers, providers and end-users. It canvassed considerable debate on how best the Key Competencies should be identified and integrated within training package qualifications.

PROJECT OUTLINE

The project was undertaken in two stages. The first stage consisted of a data collection process using individual and group interviews to discuss issues concerned with the specification of the Key Competencies within Training Packages and their development within Training Package programs. This data was then analysed and an interim report was prepared.

The interim report was then distributed to all participants in the stage 1 interview as well as providers and Training Package developers from a wider selection of Training Packages. Recipients were invited to either attend a focus group to discuss the findings of the interim report or to fill in a questionnaire response. This process enabled a validation of the data collected in Stage 1 of the project.

Overall, the Training Packages which were specifically considered were:

	Stage 1 & 2		**Stage 2**
FDF98	Food	UTL98	Lifts
ICP99	Printing and Graphic Arts	CUL99	Museum and Library and Information Services
TDT97	Transport and Distribution		
BSA97	Administration	RUV98	Veterinary Nursing
CHC99	Community Services	AUR99	Automotive
MEM98	Metals and Engineering	WRR97	Retail

WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

Participants in this project came from a diversity of roles and functions with respect to development and implementation of training packages. They included: the Executive Officers (or their delegates) of National Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs); those involved in developing Training Packages; teachers from Registered Training Organisations (both TAFE and private providers) and representatives from industry enterprises currently implementing or preparing to implement Training Packages.

The participants also had different levels of understanding of and exposure to training packages. Consequently, their responses varied and represent a wide range of understandings and familiarity with both Training Packages and the Key Competencies. However, there were some distinct trends which emerged and these are summarised below.

The Key Competencies are valued and implicit in endorsed competency standards

There was general agreement as to the value of the Key Competencies, their acceptance and value in the workplace, and the need for them to be part of vocational education and training. There was no general agreement as to how this might be achieved.

It was also generally agreed that the Key Competencies were implicit in the endorsed competency standards and that the achievement of units of competencies implied that the Key Competencies would also have been achieved to the level specified.

However, many participants expressed their concern about the lack of explicit information about the integration of the Key Competencies within Training Package specifications. It was thought that this led to an unrealistic reliance on the ability of those delivering programs under Training Packages to recognise and address the integral and strategic role played by the Key Competencies within specific units of competency.

Knowledge and understanding of the Key Competencies were extremely variable especially among providers of training

Whilst there was general support for the Key Competencies, some participants were unsure as to what they were and had only limited understanding of their function both in formal training situations and in the workplace.

Participants expressed some confusion as to which key competencies are being referred to as there are a variety of meanings which can be conveyed by the term "key competencies". For example, some referred to the set of Key Competencies defined by the Mayer Committee in their 1992 report Putting Education to Work. Others identified another set of generic competencies which is especially valued within an industry/enterprise context. This set may overlap with the set of Key Competencies defined by the Mayer Committee but the language in which they are expressed and their nature are specific to and characteristic of the industry or enterprise context in which they are used. A third group referred to some enterprises and industries having specific technical and generic competencies which they consider to be "key" to their productivity and efficiency. These competencies might include OH & S, waste minimisation, customer/client relations, housekeeping, quality and workplace communication.

There is widespread confusion about the levels used in conjunction with the Key Competencies especially among the end-users of Training Packages

The confusion about the levels associated with the Key Competencies seems to be based in a number of misconceptions and adverse practices. Many of those interviewed in the research project believed that the levels assigned to individual key competencies were the AQF levels; other interviewees associated the levels with the relative importance of the Key Competencies. Thus, level 3 indicated relative unimportance whilst level 1 was clearly significant or vice versa; very few of those interviewed as end-users of the Training Packages had read the information provided for them within the Training Package materials on the subject of the Key Competencies; and some interviewees hadn't noticed that there were levels assigned to the Key Competencies.

This confusion appeared to be greatest where the Key Competencies were considered in relation to a qualification rather than with individual units of competence.

The cause for much of this confusion lies with the way Training Packages are being published and in some undesirable past practices with respect to curriculum documentation which are persisting through the transition to Training Packages. These include: the publication of the explanation about how the Key Competencies have been included within the units of competency in a separate volume from the actual units of competency. This has wider implications on the possible misuse of Training Packages.

This misuse arises from assumptions made by teachers and trainers who only have access to part of the package; the use of a table showing the Key Competencies and the level at which they are included within a unit of competency with no reference to a key as to what is meant by the table or how it is to be interpreted and used; and the common practice within RTOs to give teachers and assessors copies of those units of competence for which they have responsibility only.

In the case of NSW providers, the use of centrally developed curriculum for delivering the Training Packages means that teachers may not have ever had access to the Training Package.

All these situations mean that teachers often don't develop an enlarged perspective or "big picture" of the students' learning experience and the organisational framework in which they are working. It is, therefore, probable that they may not understand the context for which the training package has been

developed and the interrelationships and packaging rules which a Training Package defines. The development and application of the Key Competencies is closely associated with the integration of different competencies and their transfer across differing contexts and work situations. Such integration and transfer is unlikely to occur if those facilitating learning or assessing competencies are themselves unaware of the "bigger picture".

Training Packages specify applications of the Key Competencies not their development

This opinion was stressed by several Training package developers and is fundamental to understanding the complexity of ensuring that vocational education, training and assessment which occurs within the context of Training Packages is underpinned and enhanced by the Key Competencies. Training packages are designed to specify the required outcomes of training and/or workplace learning. It is the RTO who must use the professional expertise of its staff to determine how best these outcomes might be achieved and assessed (within the framework of the assessment guidelines).

It is, therefore, the provider who must facilitate the appropriate development of the Key Competencies to ensure that the required competencies can be achieved. The challenge is to ensure that the relationship between units of competency and the Key Competencies is sufficiently explicit to ensure its recognition by teachers, workplace mentors and assessors.

Training Packages require substantial change in vocational education, training and assessment practices

Many, though not all, of the participants recognised that Training Packages effectively shift much of the responsibility for the provision of detailed curriculum and support materials from the state to the individual training provider. Whilst the state (through ANTA) retains the responsibility for establishing the outcomes of training and the quality and recognition framework in which vocational education, training and assessment occur, the responsibility for designing, developing, implementing and supporting effective training paths to meet student needs becomes the responsibility of the registered training providers (RTOs).

Such a shift represents both an opportunity and a threat to teachers and trainers. Whilst it recognises the professional expertise of teachers and trainers to identify the best way to achieve educational objectives, its introduction comes after a period of reliance on pre-packaged learning support materials and curriculum guidelines and at a time when fewer VET teachers and trainers have had access to formal educational training other than workplace training and assessment programs.

The introduction of Training Packages also represents a substantial change in vocational education, training and assessment practices at a time when most RTOs are working under lean budgets and staffing ratios. The relative high proportions of casual staff and/or those with only minimal or no formal educational training in course design and development and support material development thus becomes problematic. The short lead-in times between the release of the Training Packages and their implementation exacerbates this problem.

Such a change process must be managed over a considerable timeframe if the potential of Training Packages as a framework for flexible, responsive and effective training is to be realised. Substantial support for professional development of teachers, trainers and mentors within the system is essential.

Substantial professional development will be needed to ensure that VET teachers and trainers have the requisite skills in: planning educational programs to minimise unnecessary repetition and to maximise connections between different units of competency; designing and developing support materials to enhance learning; facilitating workplace learning and working collaboratively with workplace mentors and active learning techniques which support holistic and contextually based learning

It is not surprising that in an environment of substantial change, issues such as the Key Competencies and basic educational skills are being lost or ignored while teachers grapple with having to make substantial changes in their everyday practice and to become more workplace and student centred. However, it is a shift worth fostering and requires effective support over a sustained period.

Employers value the Key Competencies and they are often reflected in their employment selection criteria

Many participants noted that employers, within their respective industry areas, used generic skills as the basis of their selection processes for employment. Whilst base qualifications and technical skills are seen as important, employers were reported as saying that whereas technical competencies could be enhanced within the workplace, the remediation of generic skills, such as the Key Competencies, was a much more difficult proposition. This view was based on a belief by employers that they, or their staff, did not have the necessary educative competence for this task.

As a consequence of this, many of the research participants identified the failure to explicitly develop the Key Competencies as an equity issue.

The contextual nature of the Key Competencies makes their development within a Training Package framework simultaneously easy and difficult.

Down (1998) noted that, within workplaces, reference to the capabilities based on the Key Competencies were often referred to as "experience, nous and commonsense" (p. 102). This view is also reflected in other research reports concerning the function of the Key Competencies within workplaces where the concept of the Key competencies embraces "both actual skills and underlying, integrative processes" (Marett & Hoggard 1996, p. 66).

Most participants in this study recognised that it is the covert, implicit nature of the Key Competencies within Training Packages which makes them simultaneously integral to workplace competence and difficult to identify and integrate within training practice.

Participants felt that the issue was one of ensuring that the integrated presence of the Key Competencies within units of competence was recognised by those implementing Training Packages rather than complicating training package documentation. It was generally agreed that this was a RTO responsibility and most developers expressed the view that central advice on this issue belonged in the training package support materials rather than in the endorsed components.

Participants involved in implementing Training Packages expressed a preference for a more explicit statement of the connection between the Key Competencies and the units of competence. It was felt that unless this link was clear and strong, the Key Competencies could be ignored in assessment and this would weaken the effectiveness of vocational education and training delivered under the framework of a particular Training Package.

A number of participants expressed concern that many training providers might view the Key Competencies as "nice to know" rather than fundamental components of the units of competency. It was believed that this view is reinforced both by the lack of explicit reference to the Key Competencies within the specification of the units of competency and the separation of information on the development of the Key Competencies and the specification of competency outcomes. This added to a belief that many providers saw the Key Competencies as an optional add-on.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The first recommendation is that clear advice is provided to developers and revisers of Training Packages (and Industry Competency Standards) on the explicit integration of the Key Competencies within Units of Competency.

A suggested strategy for achieving this is that when competency standards are developed or revised, then the performance criteria are framed around the technical skills required, the Key Competencies involved and the basic education skills needed.

The second recommendation is for the funding of professional development for teachers and trainers on the implementation of Training Packages which focuses on the development of learning paths which meet the needs of specific target groups and which enable the achievement of Training Package qualifications; strategies to ensure that the Key Competencies are a fundamental part of vocational education and training delivered under Training Packages and the development of learning strategies and resources to support the development of the Key Competencies.

This is most urgently needed. The successful implementation of Training Packages relies on the pivotal role of teachers and trainers to plan and construct suitable learning pathways, create learner-centred learning environments and facilitate effective, quality and consistent teaching, learning and assessment. it is , therefore, essential that there is greater expenditure on meaningful professional development which enables VET practitioners to develop and enhance their professional expertise to meet this challenge.

The third recommendation was that any professional development with respect to the Key Competencies be integrated within professional development relating to the implementation of Training Packages and not separate from it.

This was seen to be very important in order to avoid a perception that the Key Competencies are a "nice- to-know" or an optional add-on. The Key Competencies both underpin units of competency and also play an important role in transforming what has been learnt in workplace practice. It is, therefore, important that they are seen as integral to the development of competence under Training Packages.

Other recommendations were concerned with the co-ordination of professional development mechanisms and the production of learning resources. It was suggested that a network approach to Professional development be used with each group producing resources which can be shared across all VET providers and which help to overcome some of the current barriers to the effective implementation of Training Packages and the explicit specification of the Key Competencies within them.

The project has produced useful insights into the understanding and ability of teachers to recognised the integration of the Key Competencies within Units of Competence and the need for them to integrate the Key Competencies into their teaching practice. The introduction of Training Packages puts an end to the provision by the State of centralised curriculum and detailed resource materials which have effectively deskilled VET teachers and trainers. Training packages require teachers and trainers to construct their own curriculum in order to rapidly respond to training needs. This is critical in the delivery of workplace training as no two workplaces are alike and training needs to be tailored to the needs and nature of each workplace.

It also demands an approach to skill development which is holistic and contextual and which relies on practical application and structured reflection to enhance the learner's skill to learn from experience. The Key Competencies are a fundamental tool in this development and their integration within Training Package provision is, therefore, essential.

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