Training Packages: The learning journey to date

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This paper/presentation reports on a commissioned strategic evaluation undertaken for the Australian National Training Authority on the qualitative impact of the introduction of Training Packages on vocational education and training clients. The research involved collecting the views of over 200 vocational education and training practitioners, bureaucrats, industry personnel and students from all Australian States and Territories. The data collected provides a snapshot of conflicting views about Training Packages.

An activity theory approach was used to analyse the data. This resulted in the identification of key contextual issues which act against the adoption of Training Packages and their innovative use by VET practitioners. These issues are systemic in nature and provide an explanation for the polarity of views which, inevitably, result from any discussion of Training Packages.

It is less than six years since the move to Training Packages as the national specification of vocational education and training (VET) in Australia and less than five years since the first Training Packages were endorsed. Since then, VET providers, administrators, and industry have been on a steep learning curve as they unpack the packages to determine what they mean for the end clients of the system – Australian and international students undertaking vocational education and training programs.

Nature of the Research

The research process has attempted to collect and collate a broad-brush sweep of the views of as wide a cross-section of the participant groups as was possible within the time and resource constraints of this project. Participants were encouraged to tell their own stories and to discuss with their peers the successes, issues and challenges of Training Package implementation. As such, semi-structured focus groups supplemented by some interviews were used to collect the perceptions of participants. The participants were given a list of questions prior to the focus group but were encouraged to use the focus group session as a free-flowing discussion of their experience in the implementation of Training Packages. A summary survey instrument was used to give some degree of quantification and clarity to the recorded discussion and some participants also took advantage of the opportunity of a follow-up phone interview to discuss particular aspects of their experience.

The data collected in this research project is the perceptions of the participants at the time they participated within the focus groups or interviews. The method of collection was relatively unstructured with participants being encouraged to identify and talk about the issues which they felt were pertinent to the enquiry. The participants were drawn from people, in all States and Territories, working within State/Territory Training Authorities, industry enterprises, Industry Training Advisory Bodies (National and State) and Registered Training Authorities as well as trainees and students undertaking vocational education and training within education within educational institutions. The sample size was 216.

Such qualitative research should not be over-generalised. It is indicative, rather than conclusive**.** As such it provides vital information about how people see the introduction of Training Packages with respect to themselves. Situations and contexts, as well as the nature

and roles of the participants affect how they construct their own perceptions, understanding and realities. Whilst the content of some of the participant responses may not be factually correct, the fact that they were made is itself pertinent and cannot be dismissed. Misunderstandings and wrong impressions influence behaviour and beliefs as powerfully as do facts.

In presenting the findings of this research, care has been taken to ensure that participant-raised issues are identified and commented upon in order to indicate possibility. The raising of an issue does not automatically indicate a problem any more than a claimed success really is one. However, it does present the issues as those which may need further investigation.

Findings of the Research Project

The research process gathered data on a number of instances where the implementation of Training Packages is perceived as having resulted in new and improved practice. A number of these were documented in the report (Down in press) as case studies and include instances where the development and implementation has resulted in:

- training and qualifications in areas where previously there was none
- ready acceptance of Training Packages by those in large and medium sized enterprises
- the use of Competency Standards by enterprises for selection, work appraisal and for setting benchmarks for enterprise workplace agreements
- increased demand by industry for recognition of current competency (RCC) and "gap" training for existing employees
- signs of more efficient and accurate reporting of activity within the VET system
- a closing of the gap between institutional and enterprise training
- increase in the provision of New Apprenticeships especially those of less than 18 months duration
- the introduction of traineeships in industry sectors (or sub-sectors) where previously there has been no provision for formalised training for new entrants to the workforce
- a growth in workplace placements directed at specific skill development for students undertaking institutional VET programs
- the development of teaching and learning approaches within institutionalised settings which mirror workplace experience
- greater responsiveness to industry clients and individual learners
- the necessary conditions for professional educators to exercise their expertise
- a growth in partnerships between RTOs and enterprises to collaboratively deliver training in the workplace
- greater contextualisation of programs and learning resources for specific delivery situations such as enterprise delivery
- shift in client base with more learners already in or starting work.

These "success stories" demonstrate that the flexibility claimed as an advantage of Training Packages does, in fact, exist. The examples show that, innovatively implemented, Training Packages have the potential to provide gains in the effectiveness of vocational education and training.

The findings are compatible with those of a number of recently conducted research projects looking into different aspects of Training Package implementation and its effect on the VET community. These include the work of Victoria University (2000), VETAssess (2000), Down

(2000), Figgis et al. (2000), Moy (2000), Mitchell and Young (2001), Quay Connection and Urbis Keys Young (2001), ALNARC (2002) and Dawe (2002).

It is, however, too soon to celebrate as the research presents a picture of a system struggling against real impediments to implement a change which is only partially understood by probably most of its practitioners. Whilst this is not unusual for a change of the magnitude represented by Training Packages, it does present real challenges which need to be overcome if Training Packages are to realise their potential as an organising framework for VET provision and assessment.

Many of the impediments have less to do with the actual nature of Training Packages than the contexts into which they are being introduced. Past practice, strong and long-held beliefs about how training should be specified and delivered, resistance to change, funding and resourcing issues, collateral change processes and conflicting priorities and a lack of appropriate educational leadership have all had an inhibiting impact on the implementation of Training Packages.

Unless policy directives and compliance measures are reinforced by strong leadership, aimed at converting the hearts and minds of practitioners and giving them ownership and confidence in the change, superficial compliance rather than the desired change will result. Much of the data collected and analysed reflects a VET system struggling to give the appearance of compliance rather than embracing a whole-hearted acceptance of the change.

Areas which need careful consideration if the introduction of Training Packages is to attain its potential to deliver flexible, quality, training and assessment provision include:

- perceptions of an enduring focus (especially by RTO practitioners) on the content of Training Packages to the exclusion of their function and the anticipated shift in vocational education and training practice
- continuing confusion and misunderstandings of the difference between the specification of VET and the curriculum of its delivery
- deficits in both the National Training Information Service database and website which cause confusion, additional work and poor practice
- need for effective professional development of VET staff (including sessional staff) to ensure that VET teachers and trainers have the necessary competence to deliver Training Packages effectively
- perceptions by RTO and some industry participants of a lean, mean training environment in which the funding for program delivery, teacher support and innovative practice is insufficient
- quality assurance and accountability mechanisms which are paper rather than practice based and which create an environment in which innovation is often punished and compliance at the expense of learners' needs rewarded
- the increased ownership by industry of Training Packages and the National Training Framework (NTF) at the expense of educational institutions and practitioners
- a belief by RTO participants that there has been a shift in the emphasis of training provision to existing employees (including those undertaking traineeships) at the expense of pre-vocational learners, especially those straight from school
- assessment based on the performance of routine tasks under ideal conditions rather than an assessment of the learner's ability to deal with contingency issues resulting in a consequential failure to assess underpinning knowledge

- access and equity issues which result from shifts in training provision
- concerns about the specificity of performance outcomes, range statements and evidence guides within Training Packages
- concerns about the qualification level required for VET practitioners and the level of competence required to implement Training Packages well
- time lag between the implementation of Training Packages at the State/Territory level and the provision of professional development to practitioners on how to unpack, repack and use Training Packages in the manner intended.

Implications for the Facilitation of Change

As expected, it was impossible to limit the discussion and collected data to issues which were Training Package specific, just as it is impossible to separate out the effects caused by the structure and nature of Training Packages, the wider context of the Australian Quality Training Framework and the contexts into which Training Packages have been applied. The data was, therefore, analysed using an activity theory approach (Leont'ev 1981, 1978; Vygotsky 1987, 1978; and Engström 1999, 1996, 1995) which allowed the data to be evaluated in terms of its particular application and the context into which it was being introduced. This enabled an analysis of the implementation of Training Packages (as a fundamental, systemic change process) into a number of diverse communities each of whom were also dealing with other associated but separate change processes.

Change is a process, not an event. This evaluation has been undertaken at a time when the change is still, relatively, in its infancy. Some Training Packages – those endorsed in 1997, 1998 and 1999 - have been implemented and reviewed. Others were implemented for the first time in 2000, 2001 and 2002 whilst there are still more at the development stage. The shift in educational thinking and approach, required by Training Packages, is a substantial one and one which takes time to become integrated into practice. The research shows that this integration is far from complete and varies considerably from individual to individual. Whilst not unexpected, this variability means that people's understanding of Training Packages and the change in practice they represent is often incomplete and results in practices which leave a lot of room for improvement.

Training Packages as a vehicle for change

Most participants agreed that the change process initiated by the introduction of Training Packages was a much more fundamental and wide-reaching change than they had initially understood.

> The National Training Framework is still being worked out in actuality. Originally, it appears that neither the complexity, the workload, nor the decision making processes involved in the implementation process were fully appreciated. Perhaps it was assumed that the States and Territories would be able to do this on their own. I'm not sure.

> (ITAB participant cited in Down 2002, p. 52)

Superficially, the change was centred on a new form of training specification in order to enable more flexible and responsive vocational education and training activity. This provoked a set of predictable responses from teachers and trainers including:

- a resigned, wait-and-see approach from those who had experienced other changes in training specification which had had minimal effect on their practice;

> When I started teaching in TAFE, the Karmel Report was shaping curriculum, next we went to the Systems Model Approach and then CBT. This was just another step. I had coped with the other changes – I would wait to see what I needed to do.
>
> (RTO participant)

- a bureaucratic, prescriptive, top-down approach which took the line that we need to develop appropriate processes and procedures (the non-endorsed components?) and then teachers and trainers will know what to do (and, possibly even do it);

- resistance on the basis of having endured enough changes already and why couldn't the powers-that-be just leave them alone to get on with the job;

  > Whenever there is a new political party in power, or a new manager, at whatever level, they want to make changes to make people notice them. It's change for change's sake and not necessarily in the interests of the students.
  >
  > (RTO participant)

- enthusiastic acceptance and exploration of the change where it offered a greater sense of professional freedom, a change for the better, or simply a new challenge.

  > Training Packages do not build a course for you, thank goodness. They give us room to look at how people can do these things but if you are student-centred, teaching without a curriculum is exciting, thrilling.
  >
  > (Figgis et al. 2000, p. 34)

It soon became obvious, that a superficial reading of the nature of the change process was inadequate. Just as ripples spreading from the point of impact of a stone thrown into a still pond, the change was seen through increasing and different dimensions, faces and foci. These included:

- industry ownership and development of Training Packages and the resultant shift in power relationships between the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), industry and educators

- confusion as to where curriculum and centrally developed resources fitted within the National Training Framework

  > You read the information about packages. The term 'curricula' has disappeared. What I mean by that is, it has an effect on the ability of RTOs to deliver... That was what created the angst, when the educators looked at that course. How am I going to deliver this, within X amount of hours, with my resources?
  >
  > (ITAB participant cited in Down 2000, p. 33)

- an unacknowledged decentralisation of the responsibility and resourcing of curriculum and resource development

  > The introduction of Training Packages represents a revolution of momentous importance as it has involved the transfer of responsibility to different sectors of the VET community - without making the transfer explicit and transparent.
  >
  > (ITAB participant cited in Down 2000, p. 32)

- issues relating to the division of responsibility for vocational education and training between the Federal and State governments. For example, the Federal government drove the change agenda whilst professional development was largely a State responsibility

> The concept of Training Packages is brilliant but its implementation has been based on two major, interdependent assumptions. That is, that the States and Territories will be able to implement them in ways which fit their political, organisational and educational contexts; whilst at the same time Training Packages will retain a strong national flavour with respect to the consistency and quality of outcomes.
>
> (ITAB participant cited in Down 2000, p. 32)

- a number of concomitant and related change processes such as User Choice and the introduction of New Apprenticeships which coloured people's reactions to the introduction of Training Packages

> It is hard to tell whether the angst about Training Packages is really about Training Packages or about other things that are happening like User Choice, shifts in funding towards New Apprentices, the whole funding scene which seems to keep demanding more and more from fewer and fewer trained teachers, going to the students instead of them coming to you, flexible delivery … the list goes on.
>
> (STA participant)

- confusion as to what was the role expected of teachers and trainers within a training package framework of VET provision

> If I don't really understand what is required of me, then no amount of paperwork or auditing is going to improve my practice.
>
> (RTO participant cited in Down 2002, p. 30)

- cascading, collateral and subsequent change resulting from the introduction of Training Packages.

> What you find is that you make one change in the way you work and this leads to subsequent changes. I now spend a lot of my time travelling between workplaces. This has resulting in all sorts of hassles about industrial issues, relationships with colleagues, how my work is valued by others ……………..
>
> (RTO participant)

Change is an organic and chaotic process. Whilst some outcomes of change are predictable, many are not and a solution to one set of problems will have far-reaching implications to other systems and produce a further set of issues which need to be resolved. Change management is, perhaps, an oxymoron or an unachievable goal, especially in systemic and wide-ranging change. To rein in, or attempt to ignore, the consequences of planned change, both predicted and unexpected, will neutralise or lessen the uptake of the new behaviours, understandings and practices which accompany it. The planning of change processes, such as the introduction of Training Packages, requires a balance between risk minimisation strategies and the flexibility and willingness to recognise and capitalise beneficial, although unforeseen, consequences of the change.

We cannot manage change for other people or groups of people. Each individual, group, and enterprise needs to experience, understand and integrate the change themselves:

> No-one can resolve the crisis of reintegration on behalf of another. Every attempt to pre-empt conflict, argument, protest by rational planning, can only be abortive: however rational the planned changes, the process of implementing them must still allow the impulse of rejection to play itself out.
>
> When those who have the power to manipulate changes act as if they only have to explain, and when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off opposition as ignorance or prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives

other than their own. For the reformers have already assimilated these changes to their purposes and worked out a reformulation which makes sense to them, perhaps through months or years of analysis and debate. If they deny others the chance to do the same, they treat them as puppets dangling by the threads of their own conceptions.

(Marris 1975, p166).

Change is simultaneously a cause, vehicle and outcome of learning. Such learning is previously unknown by the learner and unbounded; it is constructed by participants as a consequence of their involvement in the change process. Such construction of new knowledge is contextually based and is mediated by contestation and discussion; the evolving discourse which accompanies the change; and by the progressive learning of individuals, groups and the whole community as the change process continues to run its course. Such learning oils the wheels of change and time and space must be available for participants to reflect on and understand their experience if the learning is to be maximised. If the 'expansive learning' (Engström 1999) of change is not valued and promoted by the design and facilitation of the change process, the learning of individuals and specific groups is unlikely to be mediated, formalised and enriched - resulting in frustration and misunderstanding.

The introduction of Training Packages has resulted in a myriad of new understandings about vocational education and practice.

It has been a learning process for RTOs, for individual teachers, for employers, for work supervisors and for the students. There have been some hiccoughs in the system but that has to be expected in a period of innovation. You have to take risks, to try things, to find out what is and is not possible within a work situation.

(RTO participant cited in Down 2002, p. 39)

These are still largely part of the oral culture of VET practice but a succession of analyses of Training Packages (such as the strategic evaluations and other research into different aspects of Training Packages commissioned by ANTA between 2000-2002 (Victoria University 2000; VETAssess 2000; Down 2000, 2002; Figgis et al. 2000; Quay Connection and Urbis Keys Young 2001)) is enabling these to be documented and thus disseminated more effectively. The new understandings articulated by the participants in the strategic evaluation of the qualitative impact of Training Packages (Down 2002) included:

- the nature of workplace and vocational learning
- simulated learning strategies as part of the need to achieve equity, in the eyes of the various stakeholders, between workplace learning undertaken on- and off-the-job
- the nature of educational-enterprise partnerships and their negotiation, formalisation, maintenance and evolution over time
- contextually-appropriate strategies for flexible and responsive learning
- effective (and not so effective) communication between different sections of the VET community
- the changing roles (and consequential organisation) of training institutions demanded by the National Training Framework consequent on the introduction of Training Packages
- reconciliation of educational objectives within the culture, mores and values of a business environment
- implications of shifts in understanding of education as a responsive service rather than a product
- assessment based on the weighing of multiple evidence rather than a single event

- shifts in the dominant metaphors through which meaning is conveyed within vocational education and training.

Conclusions

The results of this strategic evaluation should be seen as positive. The information collected and analysed shows that the change process is well underway and that all the participating students, within their interviews or focus groups, indicated overall satisfaction with their training, especially with the close nexus between their training and their current or intended work.

As with any fundamental change process, the last four years have been characterised by uncertainty, anger and a reluctance to let go of the past. It has also been a time of discovery, innovation, the rediscovery and exercise of educational expertise in designing learning paths and the adoption of more holistic learning and assessment approaches which take into account the student's current competency, their needs and their learning and work contexts.

However, the change process is far from over and continued effort is needed to prevent recidivism and/or change fatigue. For many VET practitioners, the change process is just beginning and there are indications that some of the negativity that abounds about Training Packages is making them reluctant to put their toes in the water – let alone strike out for mid-current and the white water of continuous change and improvement.

> From what I hear from other teachers, it's a lot of work and uncertainty. I'm not convinced there are any real benefits for my students and I hear that quality is an issue.
>
> (RTO participant)

> Why are we doing this? I hear a lot about what we need to do, the increased workload, the reduction in face-to-face time with students. No-one is telling me why we are putting ourselves through this pain.
>
> (RTO participant)

Such negativity abounds but it is not the whole story. The stories of successful implementation are out there, told both by the enthusiasts and the converts. Strategies and management processes are currently being developed by ANTA on an ongoing basis to assist the quality and effectiveness of Training Package provision. However, if we are to be genuine about introducing Training Packages and utilising the potential for more context focused and effective vocational education and training, then there is still more work to be done at all levels of VET provision and management and new strategies to be introduced. This is necessary to ensure that there is consistency between the aims, policy framework and practice with respect to the introduction and continued provision of Training Package programs.

The recommendations to the National Framework Quality Council were framed around four key themes. These are:

1. the need for educational leaders who can assist practitioners in the implementation of Training Packages so as to meet the needs of the clients of the VET system. Such leaders are needed at all levels to work with practitioners to envisage what can and needs to be done and to work together to make it happen

2. the provision of professional development which enables the development and maintenance of a professional VET workforce with the necessary competence to implement Training Packages in appropriate and innovative ways

3. better communication between the three partners in VET provision, that is, the State and National Training Authorities, Industry and RTOs

4. further investigation of the issues raised so that appropriate strategies can be found to address them.

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