

ARE TRAINING PACKAGES DELIVERING GENERIC SKILLS?

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ABSTRACT

Training Packages provide the new foundations for vocational education and training programs in Australia. Training Packages are developed for industry by the National Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABs), or enterprises, to meet identified training needs. The National Training Framework Committee endorsed the first Training Package (TP) in July 1997. By January 2001, 63 Training Packages were endorsed, including 56 developed for industries and seven developed by specific enterprises.

Training Packages are predicated on the implementation of a competency-based approach to training (CBT) and assessment (CBA). CBT was introduced in the late 1980s as part of wider economic policy measures to improve the skill levels of the Australian workforce. Mayer (1992) identified the workplace competencies essential for effective participation in work. The guidelines for TP development have the Mayer Key Competencies underpinning the units of competency in a Training Package.

Recent surveys of employers identify personal attributes as being most important in the workplace. Are the Mayer Key Competencies still relevant in the workplace today? What do we mean by 'generic skills' in 2001? These questions were addressed in this project which evaluated ten Training Packages. Interviews with ITAB staff, Training Package developers and stakeholders were conducted to assess if the training packages give sufficient focus to the attainment of generic skills. In the Case Studies the aim was to focus on approaches that can be used to enhance the delivery of these skills so that students are better prepared for the new demands of the workplace.

Mayer, E (chair) 1992, Putting Education to Work; The Key Competencies report, Australian Education Council and Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training, Melbourne.

Key words: 'generic skills', 'Training Packages', 'key competencies', 'competency-based', 'vocational education and training'

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on the results of a study, conducted by NCVER, into the incorporation of generic skills in the Australian Training Packages.

1.1 About NCVER

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) manages the national vocational education and training (VET) research program funded by the Commonwealth government through the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). Under contract also from ANTA is the compilation and maintenance of the National VET databases. This data is collected primarily through the student enrolment forms or New Apprenticeship agreements and secondly from the National Student Outcomes Survey or Employer Survey. In addition, NCVER compiles the international UNESCO NCVER VOCED database of VET research. NCVER conducts additional research, and publishes and disseminates the findings through its web site, research forums and presentations.

1.2 About the study

The study aimed to investigate the ways that the Mayer Key Competencies or other generic skills have been incorporated into national Training Packages, and to assess whether or not there is sufficient focus on the attainment of generic skills. The study also examined ways to enhance the delivery of these skills so that students are better prepared for the new demands of the workplace. That the importance of underpinning knowledge, generic competencies and work-readiness skills were not sufficiently emphasised in the Australian Training Packages was first raised in the ANTA report on school to work transition (McDonald *et al*, 1999).

The methodology for the study included a review of the literature, examination of endorsed Training Packages and an investigation of the implementation of Training Packages in the following industries:

Administration/Business Services	Entertainment
Agriculture/Horticulture	Hospitality
Australian Red Cross Blood Service	Information Technology
Community Services	Metal and Engineering
Construction	Retail

Information was gathered through in-person and telephone interviews with ITAB personnel responsible for the development of the selected Training Packages, workplace trainers/assessors and lecturers from Registered Training Organisations selected for their reputation for good practice in the particular industry.

1.3 About Training Packages

Historically training delivery and the issuing of VET qualifications in Australia developed on a state-by-state basis. Training Packages bring together through one industry-managed process the previously disconnected approaches to standards, programs, qualifications and learning resources. As such they comprise a consistent and reliable set of nationally endorsed components for training and assessing people's skills.

Training Packages are developed for industry by National Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs), recognised Bodies, or enterprises, to meet identified training needs of specific industries or industry sectors. They were first developed following the Allen Consulting Group's (1994) review of the implementation of training reforms, which showed that employers wanted less prescription and more flexibility for users of the nationally endorsed competency standards.

Today Training Packages are progressively being implemented in all industry sectors and across industries through a process of development, review and/or identification of competency standards and national qualifications. The first Training Package was endorsed by the National Training Framework Committee in July 1997. By January 2001, 56 industry and seven enterprise-specific training packages had received endorsement. Training Packages define a range of training and assessment pathways, which mean that people can learn on-the-job and/or off-the-job and achieve a national qualification. In addition VET-in-Schools programmes are increasingly based on training packages.

The Training Package concept of competency is, according to ANTA, 'the specification of knowledge and skill, and the application of that knowledge and skill to the standard of performance required in the workplace' (ANTA 1999 p.10). This allows workplaces to customize training programs according to needs, and individuals and their employers to decide on the combination of training and assessment pathways they will follow. In addition, training packages make it possible for individuals to acquire recognition through assessment only processes, which include the gathering of evidence to show competence.

Training Packages are endorsed for a period of three years. After they have been in operation for eighteen months, they must undergo a review, and submit the results of this in a Review report to ANTA. Following the review, the Training Package is revised and enhanced, and after consultation with industry stakeholders, the enhanced Training Package is once again submitted for endorsement. Training Packages comprise a set of endorsed and non-endorsed components. Endorsed components include competency standards, assessment guidelines and qualifications. Non-endorsed components may include learning strategies, assessment resources and professional development materials.

1.4 Key Competencies in Australia

In 1992, the Education and Skill Formation Committee, subsequently known as the Mayer Committee, developed a set of competencies to detail the necessary or key skills and attributes all young people should have on entering the workplace (Mayer 1992). In the Mayer Report, these key competencies included:

- Collecting, analysing and organising information
- Communicating ideas and information
- Planning and organising activities
- Working with others and in teams
- Using mathematical ideas and techniques
- Solving problems
- Using technology

These key workplace competencies were incorporated into secondary and higher education programs, and subsequently into Training Packages (ANTA 1998). However, the key

competencies are over-lapping and inter-related and are not separate skills or processes (Hager *et al*, 1997)

In speaking about these skills or competencies employers often refer to the 'soft skills' which tend to refer to the generic skills of interpersonal communication and relationship building. The emphasis seems to have shifted towards McClland's 'behavioural competencies', cited in Spencer and Spencer (1993), and those 'new' generic skills required for the knowledge worker, lifelong learning and future employability. Kearns (2001) notes that the range of generic skills required for lifelong learning and future employability include the key competencies, as well as personal attributes and increasingly an additional modern language (including Chinese). Bowden *et al* (2000) include the 'capability to work with a global perspective' in their set of nine generic capabilities developed for university graduates.

Thus generic skills desired by employers include interpersonal skills, which relate to business communication, customer focus, teamwork, building relationships and networking. They also comprise personal attributes, which include the desire to learn and apply learning, personal responsibility, time management, critical analysis, flexibility and adaptability (ACNeilson 2000, Allen Consulting Group 2000).

2. FINDINGS

2.1 Incorporation of generic skills into Training packages

ANTA has published extensive guidelines for the development of Training Packages. In particular, they specify that in developing competency standards the key competencies and their related performance levels must be identified 'in the evidence guide at the individual unit level or by considering meaningful groups of units' (ANTA 1999 p.10). How well this was done for each Training Package examined for this study, depended upon the familiarity and use of competency standards by that industry prior to the introduction of Training Packages. For those industries where competency standards were already being used, the performance levels of the Key Competencies expected for each standard was usually done in consultation with practitioners. However, for those industry sectors where competency standards had yet to be identified, the task of writing down the competencies required for each aspect of work in that industry was found to be especially time consuming. As a result there was neither the time nor the experience to consider sufficiently the incorporation of key competencies into the Training Packages.

The enhancement of Training Packages following review includes further consideration of how the Key Competencies can be incorporated in terms of additional examples, learning strategies and details in the performance criteria. In some industries, for example the Construction industry, employers may never refer to the 'key competencies' as such. However, although this language might be foreign to these employers, it would seem that they also want employees to have these generic skills, especially those which relate to collecting and analysing information, problem-solving, working in teams, communicating ideas and information to colleagues and customers, using mathematical ideas and technology. In addition employers also require their workers to take personal responsibility for learning, work performance and future employability (WA STB 2001).

2.2 The integrated approach to training and assessment of generic skills

As already noted, Training Packages are predicated on the implementation of a competency-based approach to training and assessment or a demonstration of skills to meet industry-specified standards. A broad definition of competency is the ability to perform 'whole work roles' encompassing the normal expectations of employment, where a number of tasks need to be handled at the same time amid interactions with customers, colleagues or supervisors (Gibb 1992). This means that generic skills are integrated with technical skills and knowledge, in particular, interpersonal skills and time management skills.

Most employers agree with Gonczi (1998) that an integrated approach is required; that is, 'the capacity to bring together knowledge, values, attitudes and skills in the actual practice of an occupation is the kernel of the integrated concept' (p.36)

Ownership by industry of the competency standards and qualifications was seen as a way of encouraging more employers to deliver accredited training in the workplace. Defining the standard to be achieved as the 'workplace standard' requires assessment against the standard (unit of competency) either in a workplace or a simulated workplace. This raises most concern for the traditional classroom-based training institutions.

2.3 A variety of learning strategies

The Training Package, through assessment of outcomes, encourages the use of a variety of learning strategies. Down (2000) identifies thirteen learning strategies derived from recent VET research which support key competency development. These strategies should be used at all stages of training from entry-level to management. They have been incorporated into the latest guidelines for developers of Training Packages and used in the revision of Training Packages. Down's learning strategies include:

- Workplace projects,
- Use of critical incidents to focus discussion and problem solving,
- Investigation or enquiry based learning,
- Problem solving learning
- Project learning
- Reflection on learning and workplace practice.

Billet (1999) discusses the four elements of the collaborative and guided approaches to learning which are central to his model of workplace learning. These include:

- a logical sequence of workplace activities of increasing complexity and accountability,
- the goal or product of the workplace activities must be accessible to the learner,
- direct guidance from more expert fellow workers, including mentors and coaches, and
- indirect guidance provided by others, such as learners listening to and observing other workers, and the physical environment.

Each individual has their own motive to learn and a preferred learning style. Spencer and Spencer (1993) noted four theories on how people learn and change. These included:

- Adult Experiential Education Theory
- McClelland's Theory of Motive Acquisition
- Social Learning Theory
- Self Directed Change Theory

People are inspired to learn or change their behaviour through their own experience or by observing someone else's experience. In the example from the Aged Care Work industry experiential learning is used for the subtle differences in behaviour required by carers of the disabled or aged person. Social learning is the basis of the role modeling, mentoring or coaching strategies, which are relevant to all industries. The information gathered from the experience, or observation, only becomes a learning experience once there is an opportunity to reflect on it, relate it to some theoretical concepts and apply it. The interpretation is influenced by how, when and where the knowledge was gained, how prior experiences are organized in memory, and how these are retrieved (Billett 1996).

Industry supports the holistic approach to the development of technical and generic skills because it is closer to the real experience of the workplace. Teaching generic skills integrated with technical skills is the more complex approach but it is perceived as making them more relevant and so increasing motivation. In the example from the Computing industry, Information Technology professionals could develop their communication skills under the guidance of mentor while working on a project for a client.

In the example of the off-the-job training at Gateway campus of Brisbane Institute of TAFE, it was found necessary to teach generic skills to some apprentices separately before moving on to specific technical skills. Similarly some adult re-training groups may require separate instruction in learning skills.

3. THE CASE STUDIES: FINDINGS

3.1 Brisbane Institute of TAFE Gateway campus $\frac{3}{4}$ Gateway to the Trades

The Brisbane Institute of TAFE Gateway campus has the biggest 'User Choice' component in Queensland, comprising some \$7.5 million of training, where employers and/or apprentices have chosen this training provider. Gateway accommodates the needs of employers and apprentices in Metal and Engineering by offering flexibility in off-the-job delivery of units of competency by Day Release, Full Block Release or Split Block Release. It also offers advanced skills post-trade courses and special courses.

At Gateway lecturing staff support the teaching of the Foundation and Core units within the program because employers resist training apprentices in 'soft skills' if these units are separate. Hence generic skills or key competencies such as communication, interpreting diagrams, problem solving, reading quality assurance documentation, writing evidence and numeracy skills are mostly integrated into technical skill units. As the level of mathematics required for the Core units is lower than for technical units in some Streams, a group of apprentices may require additional mathematics before proceeding to the next unit. The Flexible Learning Unit staff have developed a 'stand alone' computerised learning system for delivery of the core unit on application of principles of Occupational Health and Safety in the work environment. Part-time tutors support lecturers in the classroom or in workplace simulation sessions and assist apprentices with core competencies on a one-to-one basis.

Gateway lecturing staff, who have also qualified as Workplace Assessors, reported difficulties in the application of the units in the workplace. For example, the Communications skills unit requires the apprentice to communicate in workplace meetings.

The Workplace Learning Centre manager works with the employer and supervisor to ensure the apprentice is included in workplace meetings and given appropriate tasks to be involved. Under the Queensland legislation the apprentice must be visited by the trainer in the workplace at least three times a year. These visits are used to help employers identify ways in which apprentices can be given tasks, which will ensure exposure and practice in certain key competencies. In addition, apprentices can request additional tutorial support or assessment.

A Learning Support (LS) teacher is linked to the teams and is in a position to determine a specific learning strategy to help the individual apprentice develop these skills. In collaboration with the lecturer the LS teacher prepares an individual workplan for the apprentice and provide individual tutorial support. As well as providing apprentices with literacy and numeracy support directly related to their course, the LS teacher has also provided counselling aimed at building self-esteem and confidence, often visiting them at home or in the workplace, to help them complete their training.

All Gateway lecturing staff are released to industry for a minimum of one week per year for maintaining their awareness of current practices. They may be engaged in activities related to Observation, Research or Practical and are required to report back against the competencies for a particular Training Package or Stream or qualification of the Training Package.

3.2 Baptist Community Services – Aged Care Work

Baptist Community Services (BCS) – NSW & ACT is a very large provider of homes for the aged, including Nursing Homes, Hostels and Self Care Units, as well as Community Aged Care Services. BCS aims to have all its carers qualified at Certificate III in Community Services-Aged Care Work and provides training for all staff and volunteers. It obtained status as a Registered Training Organization (RTO) in 1996. All carers are assessed against the competencies in the Certificate III every year in order to achieve continuous improvement objectives.

The two most important generic skills for Aged Care staff are teamwork and communication. Since carers must be able to relate to other people, especially their peers and clients, they require excellent interpersonal skills. They are required to understand clients' verbal and non-verbal communication and the practical applications required for clients. The carers include mature aged women, persons with non-English speaking backgrounds, university students, and volunteers. A variety of learning strategies are used in training because it is believed that the carers have different learning styles. These include:

- one-to-one or small group training on-the-job
- workshops activities.
- buddy systems
- case conferences
- workbooks to use on the job
- self-directed learning using video and learning material
- role plays
- experiential learning activities

In an experiential learning activity the participants take the place of a resident for a day. The trainer attends the participants and treats them as she has seen clients being treated. For example, the participants, wearing glasses to partially obstruct vision, are placed in a wheelchair and wheeled backwards quickly. The participants are also fed cold food without being told what they are eating, while the feeder talks over them to a colleague. The trainer conducts the de-briefing on a one-to-one basis and helps staff to talk about their training experience, empathise with clients and identify the practices and habits they will need to change as a result of this training.

Assessment is based on a holistic approach and may cover up to eight competencies at the one time. For example, an assessor may observe and assess competencies like showering a client, manual handling, communication, dressing and undressing all in one assessment. The assessment is competency-based so that if the staff member is assessed as not yet competent, a further one-to-one training session or practice is suggested. A second round of feedback is then sought from clients and staff. The assessment process also provides a lot of feedback to managers about the team, and the standards of service provided. In addition, the results help to achieve continuous improvement objectives.

3.3 Aspect Computing Pty Ltd, South Australia – Information Technology (IT)

The largest privately owned Australian IT services company in South Australia, Aspect Computing Pty Ltd (Aspect) offers business consulting, professional services, technical services and education and training to a wide range of both public and private sector organisations.

Aspect invests heavily in the on-going training and education of its staff. In 2000, the Manager of Human Resources and Educational Services extended the use of the training package from the traineeship for Year 12 school leavers joining the company to reform the 'in-house' training for all staff. All staff positions have been described using the competencies from the Training Packages. This means they are described in outcome-orientated terms or in the same language in which the customers want to hire the skills.

The Training Package competency standards have helped make staff Training Plans more descriptive and more outcome-orientated. This allows the skill area needed to be targeted for staff development. Training includes action learning through mentoring, self-directed learning using the software library or printed material, attending seminars, focus groups or appropriate courses. Staff are also encouraged to gather their own evidence to substantiate skill competence and self-assess.

Aspect obtained limited status as a Registered Training Provider to deliver the training under the IT Training Package for its staff and customers. It has an alliance with Douglas Mawson Institute of TAFE IT Department whose staff conduct the workplace assessment. It is also licensed to deliver a large range of Vendor Technical Certification and the training for these can now be included in Training Package dual qualifications. It has an Education Centre for off-the-job training of its clients.

Aspect supports the concept of integrating the generic competencies with the technical units so that holistic learning and assessment can occur. For example, the task being assessed may involve staff working on a technical problem within a culturally diverse team and preparing a report for the client.

4. WHAT ARE GOOD PRACTICES IN DELIVERY OF GENERIC SKILLS?

The findings of this study identified specific key points to enhance the delivery of generic skills through Training Packages. These included the:

- integration of generic and technical skills in training and assessment at all levels;
- development of infrastructure support for planning, delivery, assessment, monitoring and supporting workplace training;
- involvement of a qualified workplace trainer/mentor and all managers;
- promotion of assessment and training as part of normal workplace activity to reflect and improve actual workplace performances;
- generic competencies included in job descriptions;
- availability to teaching staff within educational institutions of annual industry release or regular visits to workplaces; and
- qualification of teaching staff within educational institutions in workplace training and assessment.
- provision of work-based assessment of generic skills for unemployed students within educational institutions through work placements or work simulation.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study indicates that although there is provision within Training Packages to incorporate generic competencies within training and assessment programs, there is still much work to be done by experienced trainers to ensure that this type of training occurs in workplaces or in training institutions. It is also clear that unless there is specific reference to these skills within evidence guides there is a danger that they will be ignored.

This paper has presented an argument for integrating generic and technical competencies in the training of flexible and adaptable workers. This places a special emphasis on teachers and trainers devising learning strategies, which will ensure that these skills are developed and understood as essential components of any job. In addition, training in these skills is on-going with enhancement through all qualification levels including management. This indicates that assessment processes must involve the generic skills or key competencies.

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