

# **Doing it well, doing it better: Practitioners, pedagogy and training packages**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on a scoping study conducted for the Australian National Training Authority in 2003 into teaching and learning. The research was designed to identify key issues and themes that VET practitioners identified as being challenging in the translation of training packages into teaching, learning and assessment strategies. Recent research had provided evidence that practitioners were still coming to grips with the changes to pedagogical practice in a training package environment and it was considered strategically important to support the development of professionalism within the VET system and re-emphasise the importance of pedagogy.

The study verified an observation commonly made in the extensive literature on teaching and learning in VET: that VET practitioners are delivering in a range of contexts, using broad ranging strategies and various tools and technologies to meet the needs of diverse learners. It also found clear evidence that a considerable amount of effective and innovative teaching and learning was taking place.

However, what some teachers and trainers were doing well continued to challenge some other practitioners. A good deal of the research literature had previously pointed to the skills and knowledge gaps that many practitioners have when working in a training package environment. This study provided further evidence that a number of pedagogical issues need to be addressed and VET practitioners supported to build their capabilities to take on the current and future challenges in VET delivery.

## **Introduction**

The genesis of this teaching and learning scoping study lay in the report of focus group research for the *National Strategy for VET 2004-2010* (ANTA, 2002b) which found that there are training providers who are still coming up to speed with the implementation of training packages. The report outlined various client concerns regarding consistency, flexibility and quality as well as provider concerns about trying to balance the need for teaching skills with the requirements for industry experience.

It has been argued that training packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework have attempted to address these concerns. They provide for nationally focused industry-led training programs that encourage flexibility in delivery and individual learning. However, the *National Strategy for VET 2004-2010* report implied that the support strategies and policy initiatives have not met with success or communicated a clear message to providers and individual practitioners.

This latter point was most evident in the findings of the National Training Quality Council strategic evaluation report *Qualitative Impact of Training Packages on*

*Vocational Education and Training Clients* (Down, 2002). The report presents ‘...a picture of a system struggling against real impediments to implement change which is only partially understood by probably most practitioners.’ (ANTA, 2002c, p.5)

Thus, the brief for this scoping exercise was to identify key issues and themes that vocational education and training (VET) practitioners identify as being challenging in the translation of training packages into teaching, learning and assessment strategies. The focus was on VET pedagogy and the aim of the project was to clarify practitioner concerns in order that they might inform the development of resources to support better practice in the future.

### **Research strategies and information sources**

The complexity and variety of perspectives that were required to inform this scoping project dictated the application of a multi-method approach. A mix of quantitative and qualitative methods was used, including an environmental scan of recent Australian and overseas literature on teaching and learning in vocational education and training and of resources currently being used to support the delivery of training.

At the same time, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 people in the sector acknowledged as having expertise or a strong interest in the initial training of VET practitioners and their ongoing professional development. These informants included chief executive officers and middle managers of registered training organisations, a number of teacher educators, two researchers undertaking parallel projects in innovation in teaching and learning and the project manager responsible for the review of the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training.

To identify the issues and concerns of those engaged in the delivery of Training Package qualifications, 14 practitioner focus groups were conducted across Australia, with a total 133 people taking part. A further 365 practitioners completed a questionnaire which was hosted on the Australian National Training Authority’s Resource Generator website ([www.resourcegenerator.gov.au/survey/](http://www.resourcegenerator.gov.au/survey/)). Practitioners were able to respond using either an online, fax-back or email option.

Questionnaire respondents were drawn from 34 public providers and 16 private providers. 15% had less than three years teaching experience in the sector, 39% had been teaching between three and ten years, 34% between eleven and 20 years and 12% had been involved in VET delivery for more than twenty years. 24% of the respondents had the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training only, while the remainder had graduate and post-graduate qualifications. In total, informants to the study were engaged in the delivery of approximately 60 training packages across the full range of VET qualifications.

### **Findings and discussion**

Considerable insights into teaching and learning in the sector have been provided by recent Australian research on change and its impact upon VET practitioners and practice (Billett et al, 1999; Chappell & Johnston, 2003; Harris et al, forthcoming), innovation in teaching and learning (Mitchell et al, 2003), and VET pedagogy (ANTA, 2002a; Chappell, 2003; Willmott & Barry, 2002). A number of these studies

identified considerable evidence of practitioners providing highly effective and innovative training in a training package environment.

*Doing it well: A focus on individuals and industry*

In describing what practitioners are doing well, a number of the VET experts in this scoping study commented that the most significant development associated with the implementation of training packages was that practitioners are paying more attention to the needs of individual learners and to their preferred styles of learning. Teachers and trainers were seen to be carefully analysing learning needs prior to the commencement of training, and targeting training specifically to meet identified gaps. One outcome of such an approach has been the formation of stronger relationships between practitioners and individual learners.

VET experts also saw practitioners exploring ways in which they can enhance and enrich their teaching by experimenting with a range of resources like audio, video, text-based materials, online, CD, and combinations of these.

Furthermore, they noted that practitioners are linking much more effectively with industry in order to find out what is going on with employment, industry patterns and the use of new technologies in workplaces. By delivering flexibly in real work environments, by actively participating in industry advisory groups and researching workplaces, practitioners are engaging in much deeper networking than just 'staying in contact with industry.' With deeper knowledge, practitioners are much more able to contextualise, customise and cluster training to suit both individual, employer and broader industry needs.

As noted by one senior manager suggested:

*Practitioners who are meeting the needs of learners are listening to industry generally and they are listening well to individual enterprises where learners are from an enterprise. Teachers are growing in their sophistication in terms of understanding the industries that individuals come from.*

These views were supported by focus group participants who pointed to the increased validity of their teaching when it was learner-centred and industry-focused. They cited the advantages for learners of practitioners contextualising the learning, and taking an integrated approach to the holistic delivery of competencies. Flexibility in approach and delivery was seen to be a necessary part of these strategies, and as one of the major advantages of working with training packages.

*Doing it well: A focus on teaching and learning strategies*

To determine practitioner views on what they were doing well, they were asked via a questionnaire to rate how effectively they incorporated 20 teaching and learning strategies in their delivery of Training Package qualifications. The list of 20 strategies was collated from an analysis of recent VET literature on pedagogy and the advice of the designated VET experts and the Project Steering Committee supporting the study.

In a self-assessment process, practitioners were asked to use the following scale to evaluate their ability to incorporate each of the strategies in their own delivery:

- 3 'effectively and confidently',
- 2 'to some extent, but I find the aspect challenging to implement'
- 1 'I do not know enough about this aspect to confidently apply it'
- 0 'not applicable'

Table 1 outlines the responses for the rating 'effectively and confidently' for each of the nominated strategies.

**Table 1 Rating 3: Performed Effectively and Confidently (n = 365)**

<b>Teaching and learning strategy</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Adult learning principles	270	74.0
Assessment: strategies, processes, tools	243	66.6
Facilitation skills eg. managing group dynamics	235	64.4
Networking: liaising with colleagues, resource sharing	232	63.6
Implementing continuous improvement	219	60.0
Flexible approaches in delivery and assessment	213	58.4
Evaluating training	211	57.8
Learning styles of different learners	207	56.7
Integrating learning and assessment	206	56.4
Interpreting competency standards	205	56.2
Incorporating Key Competencies in delivery	189	51.8
Customising learning for different training contexts	179	49.0
Collaborating with industry	179	49.0
Implementing innovative approaches	173	47.4
Using problem-based learning approaches	173	47.4
Mentoring peers	158	43.3
Language and literacy	150	41.1
Cultural diversity in training	143	39.2
Enhancing learner autonomy: negotiated learning, etc	129	35.3
Team teaching	126	34.5

An examination of the data revealed only minor variations in the ratings given by the 87 respondents with the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training only, the responses of the 56 respondents with less than 3 years VET teaching experience and all other respondents.

In summary, focus group participants and questionnaire respondents, like VET experts, were all able to identify aspects of their VET teaching and learning that people are doing well. These practitioners confirmed that they are focusing on the needs of learners as well the needs of employers and industry. They acknowledged the possibilities of flexibility that training packages offer. They are also using innovative approaches in the delivery of training package qualifications.

### *Doing it better*

What some teachers and trainers are doing well, however, continues to challenge many other practitioners. Research undertaken for the review of the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training (NAWT, 2001) and the work undertaken by Down (2002) have highlighted some of the issues and skills gaps associated with the early implementation of training packages. In particular, translating competency standards into learning experiences, meeting the needs of diverse groups of learners and relationships with industry and peers have been identified as critical but also problematic.

This scoping study provided further evidence that a number of pedagogical issues need to be addressed and VET practitioners supported to build their capabilities to take on the current and future challenges in VET delivery. More importantly, there was a remarkable degree of consistency in the observations of the VET experts, focus group participants and questionnaire respondents about what is important and what is needed to enhance VET teaching and learning.

VET experts were asked to identify the major issues that practitioners face in meeting the needs of their learners, and those things that practitioners find most challenging in teaching in a training package environment. Their responses can be categorised as dealing with: the specific delivery requirements of training packages; work-based training; assessment; and teaching skills in general.

The experts considered that many teachers and trainers had difficulty in interpreting training packages and translating them into teaching and learning strategies, while some also had difficulty in structuring, focusing and systematically addressing underpinning knowledge and higher order cognitive skills. Further, they claimed, the requirement to determine learners' needs and then to vary the approach to suit the learner and the context requires a lot more knowledge of the learning process and the learning context than many practitioners actually possess.

More generally, VET experts identified generic teaching skills as posing challenges to many teachers and trainers. These skills might comprise: understanding and being able to accommodate different learning styles; using simulations; meeting the diverse needs and experiences of a range of students with different attitudes and attributes; helping learners meet their long term training goals; engaging all learners more in the learning process; and addressing literacy, numeracy and motivation issues, regardless of the prior knowledge of learners.

When asked which issues they find most challenging in teaching in a training package environment, the practitioners in focus groups spoke of the difficulties that they and their peers had had in adapting to the changed teaching paradigm which training packages had brought about. They identified an ongoing need for help in understanding training packages. For example, one informant commented 'Teachers need assistance with unpacking /understanding training packages and to realise that they are not a curriculum'.

In a number of focus groups, participants identified certain systemic mismatches that they felt created challenges: including having to manage competency-based training

in a ‘time-based regime’, and that training packages assume a workplace or industry context while many learners do not have a workplace.

For some focus group participants, the demands of the AQTF were seen as conflicting with, rather than supportive of, good teaching practice. For others, requirements to conduct more rigorous assessment, to customise training, to have simulated workplaces, to assess on the job, to help learners be more pro-active, to meet the needs of self-paced learners (often within continuous intakes), having to ‘sell’ training packages to industry, and to adapt existing resources to meet current needs were the everyday challenges for practitioners.

Moreover, in a working environment that was generally acknowledged to be enormously demanding on teachers’ and trainers’ time, a further challenge was the maintenance of practitioners’ self-confidence and self-esteem.

As previously discussed, respondents to the questionnaire were asked to rate their performance against the 20 designated teaching and learning strategies. By responding with a rating of 2, the practitioners were indicating that they incorporated these strategies into their own teaching to some extent, but that they did find the aspect challenging to implement. Table 2 sets out the top ten strategies receiving a rating of 2 by respondents.

**Table 2: Performed to some extent, but aspect challenging to implement (n = 365)**

Teaching and learning strategy	No.	%
Enhancing learner autonomy: negotiated learning, collaborative assessment	182	49.9
Cultural diversity in training	172	47.1
Language and literacy	166	45.5
Implementing innovative approaches	159	43.6
Customising learning for different training contexts	154	42.2
Using problem-based learning approaches	151	41.4
Mentoring peers	145	39.7
Interpreting competency standards	142	38.9
Integrating learning and assessment	141	38.6
Learning styles of different learners	139	38.1

By responding with a rating of 1, questionnaire respondents were indicating that they did not know enough about the particular teaching or learning strategy to confidently apply it in their day-to-day delivery. The 10 strategies that received the highest number of ratings of 1 are outlined in Table 3 overleaf.

**Table 3: Rating 1: Do not know enough about this aspect to confidently apply it (n = 365)**

<b>Teaching and learning strategy</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Enhancing learner autonomy: negotiated learning, collaborative assessment	48	13.2
Collaborating with industry	45	12.3
Cultural diversity in training	43	11.8
Team teaching	40	11.0
Language and literacy	39	10.7
Incorporating Key Competencies in delivery	38	10.4
Using problem-based learning approaches	34	9.3
Implementing innovative approaches	29	7.9
Mentoring peers	28	7.7
Customising learning for different training contexts	24	6.6

Combining all responses rated 2 (*to some extent, but I find the aspect challenging to implement*) and 1 (*I do not know enough about this aspect to confidently apply it*), the data give a clear indication of the areas of teaching and learning where practitioners consider they have knowledge and skill deficits. Regardless of their years of teaching or their qualifications, more than fifty percent of respondents to the questionnaire assessed themselves as not having sufficient knowledge or confidence to incorporate the following strategies into their day-to-day delivery:

- Enhancing learner autonomy: negotiated learning, collaborative assessment (63.1%)
- Cultural diversity in training (58.9%)
- Language and literacy (56.2%)
- Implementing innovative approaches (51.5%)
- Using problem-based learning approaches (50.7%)

Given the complex nature of VET learning environments and the diversity of VET clients, it is evident from findings that skills development and resource support are vital issues for practitioners, training providers and the national VET system.

## **Conclusions**

The informants to this study, who were drawn from a full range of VET teaching and learning environments, described a sector in which a considerable amount of effective and innovative teaching and learning is taking place. They were able to articulate examples of good practice and the opportunities afforded by working with training packages. The examples of effective teaching and learning provided can be characterised as having distinct, interlinking features – they are learner-centred, workplace relevant, flexible and innovative.

However, for many practitioners aspects of training packages delivery remain a challenge. Translating competency standards into learning experiences, meeting the needs of diverse groups of learners and relationships with industry and peers have been identified as critical but also problematic. This scoping study provides further evidence that a number of pedagogical issues need to be addressed and VET

practitioners supported to build their capabilities to take on the current and future challenges in VET delivery.

Whether they were newcomers to the sector or people with extensive experience and involvement in VET; whether they assessed themselves as being confident in the application of teaching and learning strategies or whether they saw themselves as lacking in confidence, informants responded frankly to the questions they were asked. There was a remarkable degree of consistency in the observations of the VET experts, focus group participants and questionnaire respondents about what is important and what is needed to enhance teaching and learning. Significantly, a large percentage of the practitioner informants want more resources even in those areas of their practice in which they assess themselves as performing well. This would seem to indicate a high level of conscientiousness and critical reflection on their parts.

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