# What are the alternatives to training packages?

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*The VET sector is polarised between those who support training packages and those who oppose them. However, in criticising training packages opponents have not generally suggested alternative models of qualifications and curriculum. This limits debate because unless alternatives are considered we are constrained by the existing training package framework and can at best suggest modifications that ameliorate its worst excesses. This paper attempts to contribute to a discussion within the VET community about alternatives to training packages. It considers the role of qualifications more broadly, and the type of qualifications we need to deal with rapid technological, economic, social and cultural change. The conclusion reached is that we must place less emphasis on the detailed specification of learning or competency outcomes, and more on developing communities of trust to underpin qualifications.*

## Introduction

The VET policy community, managers and teachers are polarised between those for and against training packages. Debate has been robust because training packages are the required form of provision in the VET sector, and critics cannot just 'work around' them. The Australian National Training Authority is currently reviewing training packages, and this provides a good opportunity for the VET sector to step back and consider the role of qualifications more broadly. This paper uses the research literature to consider the type of qualifications we need to deal with rapid technological, economic, social and cultural change. It draws on recent work by Michael Young around the role of qualifications frameworks in supporting lifelong learning, and uses activity theory as the organising framework for considering alternative models of qualification and curriculum. First, I discuss the broader context that shapes qualifications and pressures for change from existing models based on the detailed specification of outcomes. I then consider alternatives, concluding with a discussion of the curricular and policy implications that ensue if these alternatives are implemented.

## The broader context

Qualifications are the link between the formal education and training system and the labour market are more generally mediate between competing social and economic interests in society. As a consequence, qualifications and qualifications frameworks contain contradictions and tensions as they try to reconcile the different and competing claims and needs of stakeholders: students, teachers, employers, government and the broader community (Keating, 2003).

These contradictions are resolved in different ways, depending on whether the society is a co-ordinated market economy or a liberal market economy. Continental Europe tends to have market economies which are coordinated by their social partners: government, business and labour through dense networks of interdependent relations. The liberal market economies of the Anglophone countries are rather freer, relying more on the market to regulate economic activity, and these economies are characterised by regulatory frameworks that set the rules for competition between the players (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Relationships between education and training

providers, employers, unions and government are different in each system. In co-ordinated market economies education and training providers work through formal and substantive partnerships with enterprises and unions. In liberal market economies the emphasis is on the creation of markets in education, competition between providers, and more reliance on the market to sort and match graduates and employment, based on the idea that Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' will sort it all out (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

Each type of system has a different approach to qualifications. Michael Young refers to the Anglophone (liberal market economies) systems as 'outcomes-based' systems and the Germanic and Nordic (co-ordinated market economies) systems as 'process-based' or 'institutional' systems (Young, 2003).[1] In the process-based systems: "Qualifications 'on their own' are not used by governments as a lever for change…Reforms rely in broad rather than specific criteria, clear input definitions or learning programmes and peer and partnership trust to promote progression, primarily through institutional links" (Young, 2003: 206). This is more characteristic of societies which use networks of interdependent relations and looser and more open-ended concepts of contract to co-ordinate the economy.

Anglophone countries have a different approach. The 'resolution' of conflicting interests in Anglophone countries has been through the imposition of neo-liberal reform. Social relations are subordinated to the market, and are themselves regulated through market mechanisms (for example, through students as 'consumers' or 'customers'). The focus of education and training (particularly VET) is to support the market and to produce market behaviours (Marginson, 1997). The reforms to VET meant that the outcomes sought from education and training subsequently narrowed, and in Australia this was expressed through limiting VET as training for work, focussed on detailed outcomes as specified by industry.

Liberal market economies are characterised by low levels of trust (in contrast to co-ordinated market economies), and rely more on 'the rules' to regulate the activities of actors (enterprises and individuals). In the absence of close interdependent relations between education and training providers and enterprises, the qualifications themselves now become signifiers of the skills and attributes of individuals, and are formally certified to that end. The process of certification is therefore very important as a signifier in the market. A qualifications market needs a qualifications framework, and qualifications become commodities that are used as the basis of exchange (Wheelahan and Moodie, forthcoming). Young (2003: 199) explains that in Anglophone systems qualifications moved from being a guide to devising assessments and normative criteria to compare learners, to "claiming to be a precise definition of what a person could do—in other words, evidence of his or her competence." This represents, in his view:

"…a move away from a system of qualifications based on the shared practices of teachers and trainers in different crafts and trades, professions and academic disciplines, each with their specific skill and knowledge requirements, to a system of

[1] Although Young does not use the terms co-ordinated or liberal market economies to describe these countries.

qualifications based on agreed national criteria which underpin all qualifications within a single framework" (emphasis in original, Young, 2001: 11).

**Pressures for change**

We need to consider whether outcomes based systems are able to meet the challenges of societies experiencing continuous technological, social, cultural and economic change. There is some evidence for the need for change coming from neo-liberal theorists, and not just the 'usual suspects' who argue for a broader role for education. Porter and Ketels (2003) argue that countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia need to develop national competitiveness through building collaborative industry networks and clusters since through clusters industry, labour and providers of services such as education adjust to each others' current and emerging needs. The conclusion that I draw from this is that Australia needs to develop frameworks similar to those of the co-ordinated market economies, which includes strong partnerships between stakeholders in developing qualifications and curriculum. However, this will not happen unless education and training providers are enmeshed in dense networks of relationships with enterprises (Culpepper, 2001), and qualifications grounded in trust rather than the detailed specification of outcomes.

Young (2001: 9) questions whether outcomes-based qualifications frameworks are adequate for meeting the needs of the future. He argues that political reforms which sought to make qualifications independent of awarding institutions have robbed qualifications of the capacity to incorporate the open-ended learning necessary for societies experiencing perpetual change. He says that:

"…it may… be useful to explore evidence of the extent to which an over-emphasis on qualifications (and in particular, the tendency for this to lead to a greater emphasis on the assessment of outcomes) can unintentionally inhibit the on-going learning that is not geared to testing or assessment. If people are to become lifelong learners it is the learning that is not immediately tested or linked to qualifications that needs to be encouraged."

He argues that given the pace of change "new kinds of learning may need to be encouraged that cannot easily be predicted in advance and may not be readily assessable for qualifications." Further:

"It may be that the balance between control and risk will need to shift, with less emphasis on assessing pre-defined outcomes and more on enabling learners to explore new possibilities that cannot be predefined. In other words, supporting learning may not be equated with a greater emphasis on qualifications, unless qualifications are themselves defined in new ways with less emphasis on prior specification of outcomes and more on learning processes and the judgements of different stakeholders" (Young, 2001: 10).

In arguing for qualifications to be grounded more in the judgements of stakeholders, Young is not necessarily proposing the wholesale adoption of the Germanic process-oriented systems. These systems can be slow to change, slow to adapt to learning needs of new occupations, and it is difficult to transfer between occupations and different sectors – particularly between vocational and general qualifications (Young,

2003). Young's conclusion is that there needs to be more convergence between process-oriented and outcomes-oriented approaches. However, such convergence may be difficult in outcomes-based systems in Anglophone countries because the decoupling of qualifications from the communities in which they were based (education and training institutions, as well as professional and trade organisations) has resulted in declining importance attached to the "communities of trust" that underpin them. Further, the unilateral move of VET to outcomes based qualifications precipitated a collapse of trust between VET and higher education and higher education's failure to recognise the new qualifications adequately. He explains that:

"…the credibility, quality and currency of a qualification is only partly based on what it says the person qualified can do or knows; far more important is the trust that society in general and specific users in particular (those whom select, recruit or promote) have in the qualification….If one or other of these communities does not underpin a qualification, it will have a problem of credibility, however well specified its outcomes" (Young, 2003: 208).

Young (2003) explains that communities of trust have been (and many still are) elitist or exclusionary. However, the alternative – the apparently democratic criterion-based approach – doesn't do away with the reality that communities of trust underpin the extent to which qualifications are valued. Consequently, government policies need to be directed at building networks that are inclusive, or helping to establish them in new and emerging areas where they do not yet exist.

**Curriculum challenges: activity theory as a response**

The conclusion of the previous section is also supported by recent findings concerning the way we learn. Recent literature is moving away from individualistic theories of learning (particularly behaviourist and cognitive approaches), to theories premised on the understanding that learning is fundamentally a social process, and involves a transformation of the learner's identity (Wenger, 1998; Engeström, 1999; Stevenson, 2003b).

Wenger (1998: 73) uses a 'community of practice' as his model of social learning. He uses the term 'legitimate peripheral participation' "to characterise the process by which newcomers become included in a community of practice" (Wenger, 1998: 100). This describes the process through which the novice comes to be recognised as a competent and then expert member of a community of practice, or a student/graduate a fully contributing and effective member of a workplace. This is helpful for us in understanding that learning involves, fundamentally, learning how to become a member of a community of practice. It is also involves the transformation of one's identity and self-perception in the process from novice to practitioner (for example, from student or beginner to teacher, nurse, mechanic etc). However, Wenger's community of practice approach is not, by itself, a sufficient basis for a curriculum. It tends to be hierarchical, taking as a given prevailing power relations, depicting learning as a process of enculturation undertaken by novices, and not as an iterative process in which all members of the community are engaged; it is static, as it focuses on the reproduction of knowledge and practice, and not their transformation or even evolution; and it does not explain *how* learning occurs, only that it *does* occur, and that it is socially situated (Engeström, 1999).

Activity theory goes beyond Wenger's community of practice approach to consider the interaction between all the elements that make up the activity system in which a community is situated, and the inherent contradictions that characterise systems (Engeström, 1999). It is these contradictions that lead to change and innovation. Human activity is directed towards an object (for example, the education of students or the treatment of the sick in a hospital) and is characterised by complex interactions between individuals, between individuals and social groups, and between different social groups (or collectivities). The activity system emerges from previous practice, is culturally mediated, and mediated through the use of artefacts (tools – for example, hammers and textbooks etc; and signs – such as language and concepts), and in the process is transformed (Stevenson, 2003b). Figure 1 is a visual representation of a model of an activity system. It shows the interaction between the various components of the system and the dynamic complexity of this interaction.

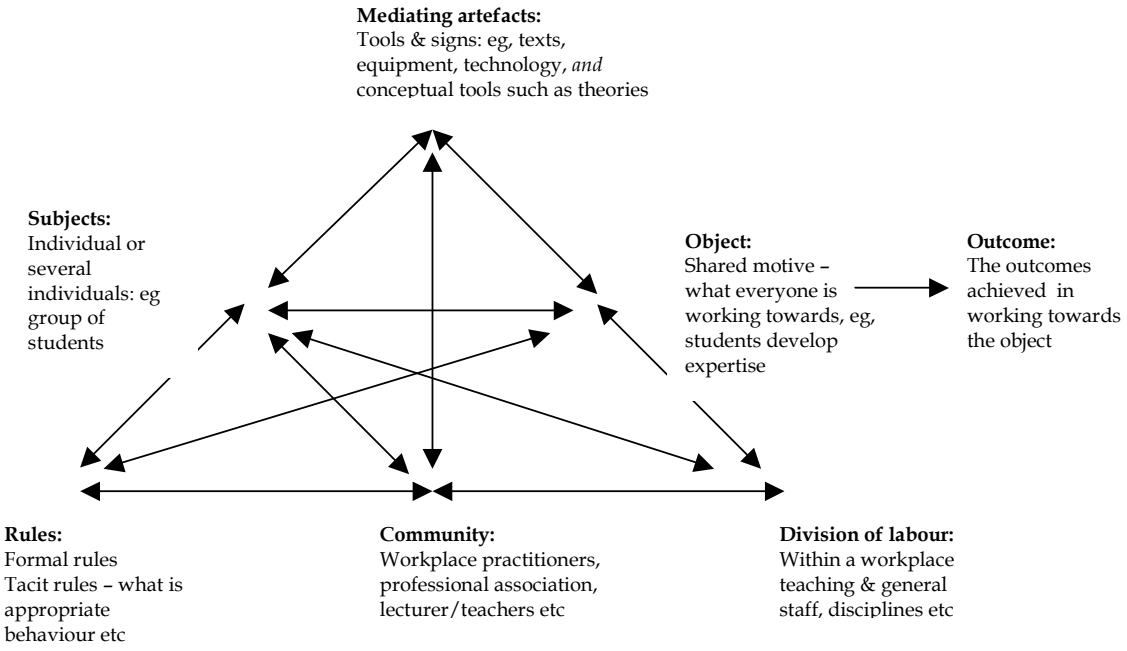


**Figure 1: A model of an activity system**
**Source: adapted from (Engeström, 1999; Stevenson, 2003b)**

Learning needs to involve becoming part of, learning about, and making connections between all elements of the activity system. It implies that dividing learning objectives into 'declarative' and 'procedural' objectives is far too narrow a way of conceiving learning, as learning to be part of, to understand, and to use the available tools within the activity system or community of practice involves holistic learning that goes beyond 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' (Stevenson, 2003a). It also implies that dividing learning into 'academic' and 'vocational' objectives or cognitive, psychomotor and affective objectives (or variations along these lines) results in disconnected learning and creates artificial distinctions based on hierarchies between different kinds of knowing (Stevenson, 2003a). This is because learning to become a member of a community of practice must engage students in *all* these dimensions.

Moreover, it implies that learning that occurs in the learning institution and the workplace (or other site in which students become part of a 'community of practice' – for example, as a member of the local environmental group) needs to be considered holistically. This goes beyond 'work placements' in a course, or similar work experience. It conceives of the community of practice as encompassing both sites – the learning institution and the workplace, and the curriculum needs to be premised on making connections between the learning (and the different meanings) that ensue in each (Stevenson, 2003b). This is because it is within the community of practice that learning occurs, connections are made, and new knowledge created by the learner and other stakeholders. This is particularly relevant if we consider that, as argued in the previous section, the outcomes of learning cannot and should not be definitively and prescriptively predefined, given the constant processes of change in work and in society. Learning, in this conception, is not just about achieving predefined outcomes that are parcelled up into distinct parcels of competencies or knowledge, each of which is assessable, stackable and countable. It also about developing shared understandings within the community of practice, and learning about how the activity system works, the rules (tacit and codified), the division of labour, the community, and the subjects (including one's self) and where they fit in. Learning is more complex and multi-faceted than traditional notions of curriculum suggest.

**Knowledge and expertise**

In working towards an object, individuals (and groups) use artefacts –tools and signs. As Figure 1 demonstrates, this includes conceptual tools, disciplinary knowledge, and other forms of knowledge as part (but only *part*) of the available arsenal. This restores theory and knowledge to education and training (the 'underpinning knowledge') as an *explicit* tool, while not privileging it over other tools. It also demonstrates why learning cannot be reduced to declarative knowledge (knowing that) or procedural knowledge (knowing how). The former limits learning to the artefacts, but only *some* artefacts – codified knowledge in texts and theories. The latter limits learning to trying to achieve the object, without the full range of artefacts and tools that are available (including theories and concepts).

The differences between novices and experts are often depicted as mainly deriving from the tacit knowledge that experts use, which novices have not yet developed. Tacit knowledge is often reduced to skill, whereas Stevenson (2001: 657) argues that it is much more complex than this: "…it seems inappropriate to dismiss tacitness as a characteristic only of skills. Tacit knowing also seems to have a central place in the situational, conceptual, procedural and strategic knowledge of experts."

Tacit knowledge or expertise includes the knowledge, concepts, ideas and experiences that we have internalised. Stevenson argues that experts use knowledge in a different way to novices. This stems from their capacity to connect the different types of meaning in the activity system. He explains that: "An expert derives this facility from many experiences, connecting the various meanings that the experiences offer, as well as meanings that others construct on those experiences" (Stevenson, 2003a: 5).

Bransford and Schwartz (1999) also contrast the different ways of knowing of novices and experts. They refer to the differentiated knowledge of the expert as 'knowing with'. This in contrast to 'knowing that' (declarative knowledge), and 'knowing how'

(procedural knowledge). People "'know with' their previously acquired concepts and experiences….By 'knowing with' our cumulative set of knowledge and experiences, we perceive, interpret, and judge situations based on our past experiences" (Bransford and Schwartz, 1999: 69 - 70). For example, in working with a new group of students, the expert and novice teacher both look at the same group of students, but see something different when they do so, and understand what they must *do* differently. A highly differentiated knowledge structure – knowing with – represents expertise in connecting meanings, and is what separates novices from experts.

Stevenson (2003a: 19) argues that students can connect meaning from different contexts and apply it only if it is personally meaningful: "Meaning does not consist just in knowing-that and knowing-how, but also in understanding what is appropriate and being able to render this in doing." Helping students to develop connections between meanings, and to integrate and internalise different kinds of knowledge so that it is personally meaningful means that learning has to be an active process. Stevenson (2003b: 40) explains that:

"In order to build facility with meanings and their interconnections, learners need to be engaged in appropriate activity that makes meanings apparent, related to clear functions and purposes, related to their own senses of vocation, and related to alternative ways of constructing meaning."

Stevenson (2001) explains that tacit knowing consists in knowing in many ways, not just in ways that can be reproduced in texts or manuals. Attempts to render all tacit knowledge (or indeed all ways of knowing) in language is problematic: "The unpacking of this knowledge is difficult and likely to lead to qualitative changes in the knowledge and its fragmentation."

If knowledge is experienced in different ways, is highly differentiated and cannot all be rendered in language, then learners need to be engaged in various experiences that will help them to access these different ways of knowing. Limiting the role of knowledge in qualifications to that which can be written down in standards and applied at work will result in impoverished learning. Yet this is what training packages do. In developing competency standards, ANTA (2001: 7) explains that:

"Standards should not include entirely knowledge based units, elements or performance criteria unless a clear and assessable workplace outcome is described. Knowledge and understanding:

- should be placed in context
- *should only be included if it refers to knowledge actually applied at work* [my emphasis.]
- could be referred to in the performance criteria and the range statement, and specified in the evidence guide"

**Implications for curriculum and qualifications**

Providing a variety of learning contexts and experiences in which students can connect meanings and thereby develop a differentiated knowledge structure should underpin the curriculum. It involves explicit engagement with the range of tools and artefacts in the activity system, including the theories and concepts that underpin it.

However, the point is not to study theories and concepts in isolation, but to learn skills in *using* these to work towards an objective. This means that learning needs to actively engage students in doing (Stevenson, 2003b).

Moreover, this helps us to resolve the angst associated with developing 'generic skills'. Rather than trying to teach decontextualised 'generic' skills, our goal should be to try to help students develop far more nuanced differentiated knowledge structures as it is these that they use in 'knowing with' when they approach situations that are relatively new or unfamiliar. Beach (1999) explains that we should be trying to support learner continuity and transformation across contexts, institutions, local practices, problems and tasks. However, the way to do this is not to move students to greater levels of generalisation founded on further levels of abstraction. Rather:

"…curriculums and teaching should support generalization that moves toward an integration of the diverse aspects of a concept and reveals the interconnected nature of its different aspects" (Beach, 1999: 112).

The implication of this analysis is that qualifications need to be more than the sum of their parts (or units of competence). Qualifications should not focus exclusively on general academic skills on the one hand, or narrowly defined occupational competencies on the other, as expertise involves the capacity to integrate and connect different kinds of knowing and apply this in innovative ways. A further implication is that while learning needs to be constructed holistically and oriented towards the student's vocation, it also needs to include different sites of learning – the workplace and the institution. Learning in one site enables learners to use this lense in examining the learning they are undertaking in another site, and neither is really dispensable. It also brings together all elements of the 'community of practice' – the workplace, teachers, and students. It also allows for the conflicts and different perspectives within a community of practice to be explored. Educators often have different views compared to practitioners in the workplace – rather than this being a problem it should be used to enhance learning, by helping students to engage with the differences to deepen their understanding.

**Implications for policy**

The implication for policy is that we need to move away from qualifications (and a qualifications framework) that relies on the detailed specification of learning or competence outcomes. While outcomes are important and need to be clearly defined, these need to be defined broadly to ensure that qualifications can help new industries to develop highly customised solutions to rapidly changing technology and work processes, and to give individuals the capacity to develop the skills they need to manage their work and learning careers. The focus and content of the curriculum needs to be premised on a *partnership* between education and training providers and industries (and other stakeholders), rather than on industry prescriptively determining in advance what education and training providers should supply. It also allows education and training providers to develop qualifications which, while signifying specific sets of learning, are also greater than the sum of their parts.

Training packages consist of prescriptive, reductive and atomistic lists of competencies. They strip knowledge from learning in VET, and result in

impoverished learning in which learners do not acquire the 'learning to learn' skills necessary for today's complex, changing world. Competencies embody codified skills (but not necessarily knowledge) that reflect current and past workplace practices, and not those required for continuous change. Furthermore, training packages are too narrowly focussed on work to the neglect of the broader skills, knowledge and attributes that people need to manage their careers in a changing world and be active citizens who contribute to their local communities and the broader society. John Dewey (1966 (1916): 79) offers us an alternative approach and although he wrote this in 1916, it seems to have renewed relevance today:

"Education may be conceived either retrospectively or prospectively. That is to say, it may be treated as process of accommodating the future to the past, or as an utilization of the past for a resource in a developing future. The former finds its standards and patterns in what has gone before."

This means that we need to rethink the Australian Qualifications Framework as a sectorally defined framework based on broad learning descriptors for all sectors, but specific competencies for the VET sector. Instead, we need to consider developing a qualifications framework that is based on broad learning outcomes for particular qualification levels, while the actual curriculum is developed through partnerships of providers, enterprises and other stakeholders. It is sometimes suggested that having qualifications based on broad national learning descriptors with locally developed curriculum will somehow weaken national recognition and the portability of qualifications. This will happen only if different industries have different regulations in each State – in which case VET should not be expected to fix all the sins of federalism.

**Conclusion**

Qualifications need to be more than the sum of their parts. They need to do more than codify existing skills. Rather, learners need to develop the capacity to think through problems in the workplace, and contribute effectively. They also need to be able to manage their learning careers and participate actively in their communities. Open-ended process oriented qualifications suit these goals more effectively than the current training packages. Moreover, stakeholders need to have trust in qualifications if they are to have value. This implies much greater control over curriculum and the development of detailed learning outcomes at the local level than is currently the case with training packages. At the national level, qualifications need to be mapped to broad learning outcomes and levels, but developed through partnerships between providers and other stakeholders, in which all participate in determining *both* the outcomes and the curriculum to meet those outcomes.

**Acknowledgement:** I am grateful to Gavin Moodie for his advice and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

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