

Aiming at the higher completion rates in VET

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Abstract

While the 2008-09 budget projections show that, despite all the talk of the Education Revolution, the education share of the budget will continue to decline, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard make much of the need for a rigorous ‘evidence base’ for their reforms (Devereaux 2008). Given that, in the VET sector, the effectiveness of training is variable, many of the trades with low completion rates are also occupations that regularly appear on the national skill shortages list (NCVER 2006).

Given that it is not possible with the available evidence to attribute low completion rate to the training (Australian Government, 2008), the National and State Governments are attempting to allocate funds to Institutes on the basis of completion of studies. This research paper discusses whether the completion rate is attributable to training and if so, how to plan and achieve higher completion rates at the Institute level in a learner-centred, work-centred and attribute-focused paradigm.

Introduction

While the recent financial crisis has perplexed the minds of the world’s governments and economists, the low level of completion rates has occupied the minds of Australian vocational educators and policy makers. Given that as per AQTF 2007, the three Quality Indicators, i.e., employer satisfaction, learner engagement and competency completion rate underpin an evidence-based and outcomes-focused approach to quality assurance in Australian VET, the question that remains to be answered is how to improve the competency completion rate. This paper argues that the answer to this question lies in the Kangan report of 1974. In other words, the roots of the symptoms of this type might be found in the Kangan Report of 1974. The Kangan report (1974) envisages a major shift of emphasis and abandons the narrow view that Technical Colleges not only pursue the needs of industry but, rather, adopt a broader perspective to meet the needs of people as individuals (Beazley, 1990).

This paper aims to explore the needs of the learners in VET, that when met, would assist to boost competency completion rate.

The education share of 2008-2012 budget will continue to decline

In spite of the revelation that the share of the vocational education and training budget continues to decline from 8.8% in 2007/8 to 8.4% in 2011/12, in the total education budget, the ideological commitment to competition and contestability in the training market is on the increase. It is also important to bear in mind that Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard once again make much of the need for a rigorous 'evidence base' for their reforms (Devereaux 2008).

According to Budget Papers (Australian Government, 2008), while it is not possible with the available evidence to attribute low completion rates to training or to broader workforce issues, it is argued that the vocational training system requires reform to deliver more responsive, higher quality training that will contribute to higher productivity growth. The Commonwealth Government (2008) asserts that to maximise the effectiveness of vocational education and training in Australia, a fundamental principle based on the highest quality in the delivery of vocational education and training should be adopted. The Institutes delivering quality and most relevant training to employers and industry should not be excluded from competing for Government funding. In this way, competition in a more contestable training market has been upheld by Government (Australian Government, 2008).

Factors contributing to low completion rates

The Budget Papers are linking the availability of funds to a rigorous monitoring of completion of studies in an 'evidence base' system (Australian Government, 2008). On the other hand, it is not possible with the available evidence to attribute low completion rates to training alone (Australian Government, 2008) as non-completion might be the result of a number of factors. For example, McInnis et al (2000) have pointed out that the possible reasons influencing withdrawal, drop-out and non-completion of VET are complex and varied.

For example McInnis et al (2000) have purported that a substantial number of students are initially not well-informed about the pathways they select between school and work, and factors such as wrong choice of course or subject, poor preparation and lack of readiness or commitment have been the reasons for non-completion. Snell and Hart (2008) have also discussed factors contributing to non-completion and high attrition rates among Australian apprentices and trainees in regional Victoria and listed a number of factors such as unpleasant working conditions, poor quality training, lack of support and low wages which contribute to both non-completion and a high degree of dissatisfaction among apprentices and trainees. Based on the available literature, some of the main reasons influencing non-completion can be summarized as follows:

- Wrong choice of course
- unpleasant working conditions
- poor quality training
- lack of support
- low wages
- Poor preparation
- Lack of readiness
- Lack of commitment

The questions that remain to be answered are firstly why under the influence of these factors some students would still complete their courses and, secondly, whether high non-completion rates have any correlation with the above factors? The Smith Family report (2006) has identified that high rates of withdrawal and non-completion within the VET sector, particularly with regard to traditional trade apprenticeships, have potential correlation to wage structures. Given that an increase in the apprentice and trainee wage can only go part-way to improving training outcomes (Snell and Hart, 2008), it is essential to search for further answers.

Searching for answers

In addition, Snell and Hart (2008) have referred to further important findings: Firstly, there are non-completers and completers who both have provided more or less identical and similar responses. Secondly, the findings from their study suggest that the experiences of non-completers and of those in-training who are likely to complete are not all that different. Snell and Hart (2008:48) have elaborated that, “it may be a false assumption to think those that have completed or are likely to complete are necessarily having a fundamentally different experience”. Their findings suggest that it is necessary to dig deeper for some answers which might be implicit in the differences of these two cohorts.

In this way, Snell and Hart (2008) provided a snapshot of those in-training who were likely to complete. These students possessed a set of excellent motivating factors that prevent them from withdrawal such as, desire to remain employed, the desire to obtain a certificate to secure employment believing that the training would help them to secure future employment. These findings are significant and show that this cohort may have been emotionally balanced as their desires which are linked to their emotions, facilitated their commitment to their studies. This finding is significant and suggests that the desire and beliefs gave this cohort the required attitudes towards completion of their studies. It can be concluded that the factors influencing non-completion are lack of motivating factors, desires and beliefs that support the attitudes for success and achievements. In other words, the attributes of desiring success, achievement and beliefs are found to be important. This finding is in line with the High Level Review report (Chappell et al, 2003) that asserts, “characteristics such as personal discipline; responsibility; willingness to take risks; loyalty; team spirit; curiosity; learning continuously; and the management of motivation, emotion and desire move far beyond vocational knowledge as traditionally understood” (Chappell et al, 2003:9). These types of attributes are part and parcel of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996)

Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1996) is claimed to be positively related to academic achievement, occupational success and satisfaction (Mathews et al, 2004). This supports the argument for a learner-centred, work-centred and attribute-focused

approach in vocational education throughout TAFE / VET policy reforms. Thus, the learner-centred, work-centred and attribute-focused approach requires the development of a number of attributes in the competency development process.

It has been argued by the Smith Family report (2006) that more concerted efforts are needed to be made in broadening and supporting a range of personal and social skills. These are the skills that are being developed by the learners while participating in the learning process in VET, such as the orientation for life long learning skills. This further confirms the Kangan perspective (Beazley 1980) to develop the learners as individuals by facilitating them to develop social skills that are beneficial for the workplace (needs of industry) as well as themselves (Beazley 1980), as opposed to furthering appreciation of achievement based solely on technically related outcomes (The Smith Family 2006:26). This implies that the focus, also, is to be placed on personal and social skills which further confirm the significance of personal attributes as the hallmarks of achievement leading to higher completion rates for the TAFE Colleges.

Given that students in VET programs are generally limited in their vision of where their training program may lead (NCVER, 2006), the Smith Family report (2006) further points out that student motivation, self-esteem and level of participation in the learning process are the key factors influencing educational outcomes (The Smith Family, 2006, 2005, 2004, 2003, 2002). TAFE can and should play an important role in the cultivation of these personal attributes, and in the promotion of lifelong learning as a catalyst for positive socio-economic development at both a personal and national level (The Smith Family 2006:5). This is, again, in line with the Kangan report of 1974 (Beazley, 1980).

In further research undertaken in the UK entitled, “Correlating trainee attributes to performance in 3D CAD training”, the correlation analysis between the trainees attributes/capabilities and performance found that a mix of the trainees’ psychological and technical attributes contributed to development of competence (Hamade, Artail and Silkstorm, 2007). In addition, the research conducted by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2007) has highlighted an important finding that many people entering the workforce today do not have the required skills or required

attributes to make them employable. This further supports High Level Review report (Chappell et al, 2003) that emphasised training in VET should be based on learner-centred, work-centred and attribute-focused approaches.

The inter-relationship of low completion rate and training

As it was referred to earlier, the desire to be successful (Snell and Hart, 2008, Chappell et al, 2003) and individual's motivation (Uren, 2001) are important attributes contributing to learners' success for completion. The fact that motivational factors are important has been further confirmed in occupational settings where a bewildering array of emotional and social competencies have been claimed to be crucial for success (Carson & Carson, 1998; Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Goleman, 1999, Weisinger, 1998, cited in Mathews et al 2004). These relevant competencies include emotional awareness to recognise and understand sentiments in self and others, empathy to be tuned to social cues to recognise and respond to needs of others (Mathews, Zeinder, Rodberts, 2004). As Mathews et al (2004) have pointed out, there is currently a growing impetus towards the provision of personal, educational, and workplace interventions that purport to increase Emotional Intelligence (EI). Another study in the UK (Higgs, 2004) on correlation between EI elements and performance in the call centres found that conscientiousness, emotional resilience, motivation and interpersonal sensitivity attitudes were the most frequently mentioned attributes for recruitment. Based on the existing literature, that supports attribute-focused as an important dimension of training, this paper argues that the completion rates and training are closely inter-related.

How to plan and achieve the higher completion rates

In 1974, when Kangan emphasized that it is important to develop learners as individuals (Beazley 1980), he meant to provide them with training on personal and individual attributes that serve them on the job in relation to the workplace as well as in their lives. This was taken by High Level Review to emphasize a learner-centred, work-centred and attribute-focused approach for VET. The Australian VET system has undergone unprecedented change in recent times, since the Kangan Report in 1974 (Chappell et al, 2003). These changes have been immense and reflect an

international focus on education and training to bring VET to the readiness stage, in order to maintain the continuous “formation of workers with appropriate knowledge, skills and capabilities in these new economic times” (Chappell et al, 2003). As Chappell et al (2003) observe these changes in education and training have been labeled by some researchers, for example, (Ball 1994; Grubb 1996; Symes & McIntyre 2000) the ‘New Vocationalism (NV).

Further, NV advocates the adopting of the attributes regarding learning as a “vital feature of human activity throughout life based on the lifelong learning which, now, has become the integrating policy goal of most OECD countries ” (Chappell 2003:33). This suggests that the new order is not only based on the acquisition of knowledge but it also involves development of skills and the acquisition of attributes. This paper argues that the VET system urgently requires that an inventory of the required attributes that are necessary for an attribute-focused approach be prepared and included in the qualifications, similar to employability skills, as the new order in vocational education requires the integration of all three constituents of competence, i.e., knowledge, skills and attributes. The Attribute-focused learning is discussed further in the next section.

Attribute Focused Learning

High Level Review (Chappell et al., 2003) has clearly asserted that in the new paradigm (NV) learning has taken the focus of learner-centred, work-centred and attribute-focused. In other words, attributes have been given a prime position at the same level of the learner-centredness and work-centredness. The High Level Review has referred to attitudes and attributes on a number of occasions. The question is whether they are the same and, if not, how to differentiate between the two which is discussed next.

Attributes and Attitudes; what is the difference?

There have been references to attributes, attitudes and dispositions in the VET literature without differentiating between them. This clarification is necessary in the VET context. Allen Consulting Group (2006:12) has pointed out that, “when

employability skills are considered in practice it becomes clear that it is not only skills that are relevant but also the particular attributes and dispositions of the individual that matter". While Allen Consulting Group has provided the definitions of skill, attribute and disposition, the definition of attitude is added to the list by this research as follows:

- a *skill* is the ability to do something well, usually gained through experience and training;
- an *attribute* is a quality, property, or characteristic of somebody or something;
- an *attitude* is a way of thinking or behaving, and
- a *disposition* is a person's usual mood or temperament or an inclination or tendency to act in a particular way.

Given that the elements of skill, attribute, attitude and disposition are connected, the attainment of a necessary skill, on its own, is unlikely to determine if a person is highly suited to a job, since attributes, attitudes and dispositions will also play a role. "Both the employee and the employer are likely to be most satisfied when a worker's skills, attributes and dispositions are a 'good fit'" (Allen Consulting Group, 2006:12) for that job and that workplace. In addition, according to the encyclopedia of psychology (Corsini and Auerbach, 1996), the attributes are connected to attitudes by beliefs. In other words attributes are the foundation or core and our beliefs, together with our attributes become the nurturing ground for our attitudes and dispositions that eventuate from attributes and the belief system we have. Figure 1 illustrates these relationships.

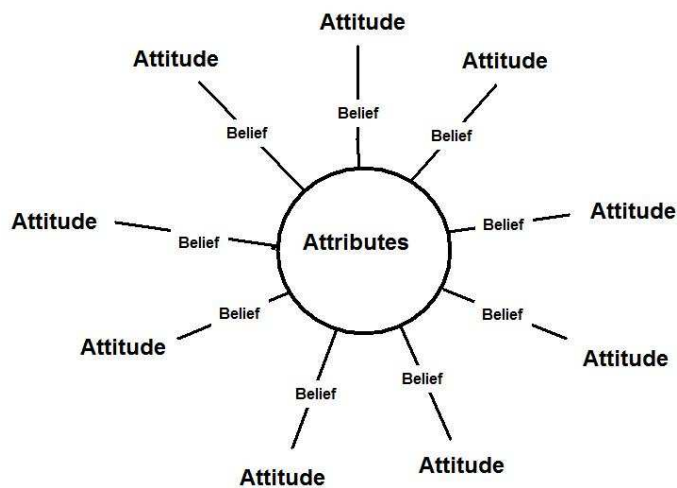


Figure 1 – Relationship of attributes, beliefs and attitudes

In the above figure, while attributes are illustrated as the sun, its rays travel through our beliefs and become our attitudes. Our attitudes towards someone or something are disposed of and become our dispositions which have directions. While our attributes are what we are, our beliefs are what give our attitudes their directions, i.e., the dispositions. The dispositions are illustrated as arrows, in Figure 2, as they are what we show towards others or things. Therefore, when our beliefs change, our attitudes and dispositions will subsequently change, too.

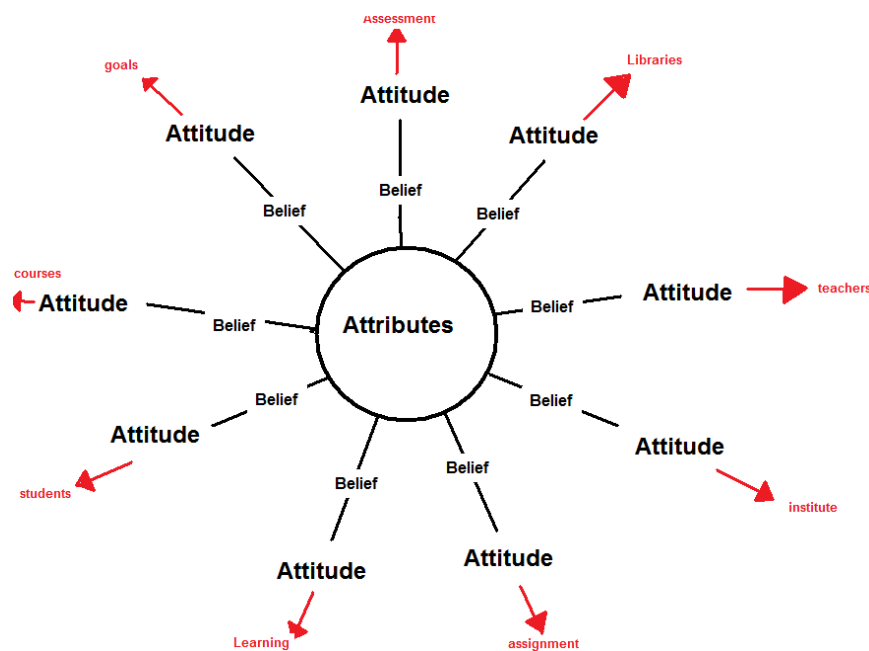


Figure 2 –attitudes and dispositions towards others and things

The question is how attributes are owned by the learners to become their foundation in life and life long learning? For example, learners need to be assisted to develop “learning to learn” as their own attribute. This is what attribute-focused approach means in VET. That is to develop learners who own their attributes as the foundation to demonstrate the right balance of attitudes towards a great number of entities, such as their studies, their goals, their teachers, other individuals and things in their lives. As Kangan (1984) has emphasized, this is the approach to develop individuals who are not only skilled in some vocations but also in life. But what is attribute-focused learning and why is it so important? This is discussed next.

Attributes, the heart ♥ intelligence of competency development

Learning becomes attribute-focused when, in addition to learner-centred and work-centred dimensions, the learning also takes the attribute-focused dimension. In other words, it is required that one should not only position the learner at the centre of the learning process in a worker-centred context but should also emphasize the attributes of learning such as developing the attribute of “Learning to learn”. For example, while in Double Heuristic Method (DHM), proposed by Azemikhah (2005b), skills

are the bridge that integrates the knowledge to performance, attributes can be clearly illustrated in the model as the hearts joining skills to performance criteria as well as to variables. The following DHM diagram (Figure 3) is constructed on the basis of Competency Test 1 for the unit FNSACCT407B at Brisbane North Institute of TAFE (BNIT) in Queensland.

DHM is a two-step (double heuristics) model that has been developed, using a ‘W’ diagram as an extension of a ‘V’ diagram proposed by Gowin & Alvarez (2005). DHM is a knowledge-integration device. Its purpose is to construct knowledge in a holistic manner. The integration process involves all the constituents of competence (propositional knowledge and dispositions) and their relationship to performance (procedural knowledge). In other words, DHM aims to integrate propositional knowledge, procedural knowledge as well as the dispositions.

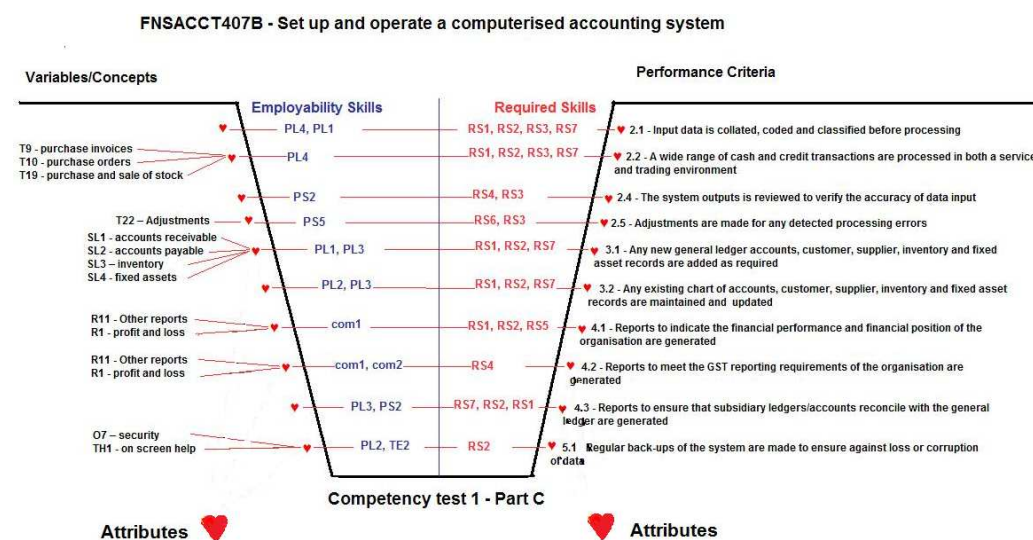


Figure 3 – Attributes as heart intelligence of competency in DHM

Earlier work focusing on Competencivism (see Azemikhah, 2008) states that, “in order for the quality of competence to be developed, and the certainty to be attained, the quality needs to be applied, through an integration process which is a method of bridging knowledge to performance by skills and attributes, and applying it to life or work scenarios, whether real or simulated” (Azemikhah, 2008). As the bridging of knowledge to performance requires both skills and attributes, it is important to

identify which attributes are to be included in the training. The attributes that play the role of heart intelligence in the competency development process are illustrated as hearts in the above diagram. The heart intelligence in this context is used as equivalent to emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996). Chappell et al (2003) assert that a contemporary VET pedagogy is one characterised as being more learner-centred, work-centred and attribute-focused and further that “the pedagogical processes chosen have the greatest influence on whether particular attributes are achieved” (Chappell et al, 2003:vii).

Chappell et al (2003) further elaborate that, in such context, technical skills are insufficient; cognitive skills, together with an array of generic skills and dispositions, are of equal importance. It is the confluence of attributes such as problem solving, continuous learning, communication, teamwork with the qualities of curiosity, motivation, risk taking that brings a richness to learning in the VET sector (Chappell et al, 2003:4). Characteristics such as personal discipline, responsibility, willingness to take risks, loyalty, team spirit, curiosity, learning continuously, and the management of motivation, emotion and desire are vital to successful rich learning. Such human attributes move far beyond vocational knowledge, as traditionally understood (Chappell et al, 2003:9).

Attributes and attitudes to be self-tested

Thus attribute-focused has become the most important component of the competency development process. In attribute-focused learning, the individual qualities are enriched by developing appropriate attributes that collectively are called in this research as ‘the heart intelligence of competency development’. By developing the appropriate attributes, the learners’ attitudes will change and keep them motivated during the course of their study to completion. This paper calls the TAFE Institutes to take appropriate initiatives in order to incorporate relevant and appropriate attributes in their training. Although there have been opposing views on the assessment of attributes and attitudes among researchers, Hager and Gillis (1995:65) have commented that, “excluding attitudes and values that are specified with the

performance criteria would, however, undermine validity”. Both the observation and self-report are recommended as the most appropriate approaches for the measurement and assessment of attitudes by Mehrens and Lehmann (1978). Henderson et al (1987) have further confirmed this view by pointing out that, “self-report procedures represent the most direct type of attitude assessment”. Hence, this research further suggests that the most appropriate method for testing of attributes and attitudes is self-assessment by the learners.

Conclusion

Attributes are the heart intelligence of Competency development and need to be emphasized, not only in the apprenticeship and traineeship programs, but across VET. Without developing the heart intelligence of competency, i. e. , the attributes, by the learners, not only will the completion rates continue to decline but, also, the productivity of the graduates on the job after the completion of studies will be poor. This will affect the economic prosperity of Australia as a result. The graduates who have not developed the right attributes will realize that they are unable to perform as expected by the industry. This process will continue throughout their lives, leading to higher levels of dissatisfaction. Based on the above arguments and facts presented, this research suggests that firstly, an inventory of the required attributes that are necessary for an attribute-focused approach be prepared and be included in the qualifications similar to employability skills and secondly, an ‘Attributes Office’ whose main task is to increase completion rates by promoting learners’ attributes be established in each of the TAFE Institutes across Australia. In other words, each TAFE Institute to be required to take the necessary steps to nurture appropriate attributes among their learners. Thus, it becomes vital for the learners to develop their capability to adopt the required skills in the right sequence and demonstrate the required attributes at the right moment while performing in an appropriate context.

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