'Will Generic Skills Ride Again? Employability and the Policy Cycle'

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Introduction

Over recent years the integration of generic skills within Australian VET has been addressed through a focus on the Key Competencies. While current approaches have been criticised on a variety of fronts for their lack of effectiveness, there is clear evidence that to varying degrees, the Key Competencies are present within Training Packages, curriculum, assessment and reporting practices used within Australian VET. Recent developments however, suggest that policy on generic skills is likely to change, resulting in a renewed effort to address what might now be termed employability skills within VET and schools.

This paper seeks to summarise these shifts and consider the developments in terms of the literature on policy and the policy process. It will also look at the emerging employability skills agenda and consider that in the context of related international developments, including the current OECD[1] work through the DeSeCo[2] Project.

What Happened to the Key Competencies?

Given the complex arrangements that characterise education and training in this country, it is not surprising the story of the Key Competencies since their inception in 1992 has been multifaceted and fragmented, with different responses and approaches evident not only in each State and Territory, but also between the different educations sectors and other related policy domains. The Key Competencies have followed what might be described as a turbulent path. Following the period of considerable public debate surrounding the development of the Key Competencies, the 1993 Perth meeting of AEC/MOVEET saw the Mayer proposal rejected on the basis of it representing a Commonwealth attempt to introduce national testing (Lingard et al 1995). Indeed, it appears that they only entered the Pilot Phase in 1994 as a result of Commonwealth efforts to save face and the willingness of the States to access the $20 million made available for projects.

While this lack of enthusiasm among the States has been borne out to some extent through piecemeal implementation since 1997, my own research and the work of others (for example Kearns 2001, Down 2000, Hagar 1998), suggest that the meaningful integration of the Key Competencies generally appears to have occurred on a more systemic level in the school sector, with standards based VET programs, including those delivered in schools, being the least advanced. This of course does not mean that there are not examples of good practice within VET, rather that practices are generally more dispersed than those that exist within the school sector in some states and territories.

To provide some insight into current arrangements within the school sector, what follows are short summaries of developments in the states of Tasmania and New South Wales.

Of all the states and territories, Tasmania would appear to be the most advanced with a framework for explicitly assessing and reporting the Key Competencies being planned for implementation through the Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE). While the fact that this comprehensive proposal has taken almost 10 years to introduce exemplifies the difficulties of

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[1] Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development (OECD)
[2] The Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo)

affecting change, it also highlights the role that individuals can play in shaping policy and resonates with the work of Yeatman (1998) and her thoughts on policy activism. The CEO of the Tasmanian Secondary Assessment Board (TASSAB) Graham Fish was part of the original Mayer Committee and he developed a proposal in 1993 prior to the Key Competency pilot phase (1994-1997). While that proposal was not acted upon by the Board, it has been suggested that the ground was in some ways prepared by its tabling. The replacement CEO of TASSAB, Malcom Salier, assumed his duties after completing his work as Chairperson of the MCEETYA Schools Task Force Working Group on Key Competencies. His own activism enabled the momentum developed by the pilots in Tasmania to be furthered by additional work funded by DETYA in the form of additional pilots during 1999-2001. While it should be noted that DETYA funded this proposal, it was after the Key Competency pilot phase had been completed when there was an assumption operating within the Department that the Commonwealth had done enough of the running on the Key Competencies and that it was now up to the States to proceed with implementation.

The subsequent $250,000 project developed a reporting framework that generated assessment criteria against three levels[3] and embedded them within the stages of schooling in Tasmania across Years 9-12. Within that framework, reporting was based on judgements generated by cross discipline groups of teachers. From that further piloting work arose a proposal to introduce a system wide approach to assessing and reporting of Key Competencies. The implementation of that proposal is currently on hold so that it can take account of the outcomes from separate work on cross curricula reporting which is occurring nationally.

Quite a different story has unfolded in NSW where it is arguable that little lasting impact has been achieved. While the Key Competency Pilot Phase was effectively overshadowed in NSW by the review of the HSC, some activism from project staff within the NSW pilot project teams ensured that the Key Competencies were referenced within the various syllabus documents that were produced within the new standards referenced framework. While Key Competency based descriptors were integrated within the syllabus standards, explicit reporting (and thus assessment) was not mandated, and their presence was effectively limited to supplementary reporting undertaken by individual schools. While the best intentions assumed that schools eager to add value to the material they generated would adopt reporting of the achievement of Key Competencies, the lack of an explicit focus from the State Training Agency has meant that this option has not been taken up. Given the issues surrounding the introduction of the new HSC, it is in some ways not surprising that informal advice from staff within the NSW Department of Education & Training (DET) suggests that no public school in NSW reports against the Key Competencies in Years 11 or 12. The cycle of curriculum review is clearly an issue here as the introduction of significant change flowing from the most widespread review of senior secondary school curriculum in NSW for over 40 years meant that the attention and resources of schools was not to be distracted by the Key Competencies. Indeed, given that the final report of the Key Competency Pilot Phase in NSW detailed findings without making recommendations, it is not surprising that the concerns among school representatives surrounding the implications for teacher professional development along with long standing suspicion of competencies, in reality shaped the limited impact that Key Competencies have had within schooling at a systemic level in NSW.

Despite this, it has been acknowledged by senior school system staff in NSW that the Key Competency Pilot Phase in particular stimulated the local debate about competencies in general education, helped give VET some parity of esteem in terms of what was of value to students, and in some ways paved the way for the more comprehensive implementation of VET in schools in

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[3] The levels of A, B & C effectively modified the original Mayer performance levels

that state. Indeed, some opinion suggests that the thinking around the Key Competency trials in NSW assisted with the transition to a standards-based assessment within the HSC. Though misunderstandings surrounding the Key Competencies have hampered implementation in both VET and schools, the factors influencing their inclusion or exclusion within school classroom practice appears to be driven more by the assessment and reporting frameworks in place, particularly in relation to post compulsory schooling qualifications such as the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in (NSW).

Its worth noting however, that despite the lack of attention within Years 11 & 12 in NSW, there is some evidence that individual schools involved in the Pilot Phase continue to utilise the Key Competencies to some extent although the scope of this has not been fully explored.

Clearly, from these two examples at least, it is evident that considerable difference exists between the responses of state school systems to the Key Competency initiative, and while these differences have affected the shape of VET in each state to some extent, the more national approach to that sector has meant that the Key Competencies within VET have been ultimately driven by training packages and the responses of Registered Training Organisations to their delivery.

Indeed, it is arguably unfortunate that when the Key Competencies needed implementation support from the VET sector towards the end of 1996 and early 1997, ANTA's resources were understandably consumed by the development and implementation of the then new Australian Training Framework and training packages. Interestingly, one reason given for the lack of attention at this time was that it was felt that approaches to standards development were reasonably refined at the time and that Rumsey's (1995) view still held sway within ANTA. This view was that Key Competencies were an issue related to standards development, however this was contrary to the main findings of the Key Competency Pilots which saw implementation as a challenge more related to issues of teaching and learning as opposed to mapping with standards and curriculum development.

Within the VET sector, Down (2000) recently noted that knowledge and understanding of the Key Competencies is extremely variable among providers of VET training. Noting that the contextual nature of the Key Competencies makes their development within a Training Package framework simultaneously simple and complex, she also indicates that there is widespread confusion about the levels used in conjunction with the Key Competencies especially among the end-users of Training Packages (2000, p 20-24).

It can be argued that the current treatment of Key Competencies within Training Packages appears fundamentally flawed, and despite efforts to foreground their importance and relevance to teaching and learning, the lack of specific requirements to address them more explicitly has meant that they are effectively sidelined within VET practice.

While there is clear evidence of Key Competencies being addressed within publicly funded VET curriculum, it is more difficult to ascertain beyond the work of Down (2000) whether classroom practice has been affected and to what extent. I will now turn to the evolving employability skills agenda that may soon affect the treatment of generic skills within Australian VET.

The Rise of An Employability Skills Agenda

Though the emergence of an Employability Skills agenda in Australia is directly linked to the funding of the 'Employability Skills for the Future Project' (ACCI & BCA 2002), it clearly has antecedents in a number of developments that have occurred since the completion of the Key

Competency Pilot Phase in 1997. The report itself suggests that the Australian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (ACCI) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA):

> 'approached the Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) indicating that now was the desirable time to attain the views of industry which would then assist in the development of a comprehensive framework of employability skills relevant to the small, medium and large enterprises and able to support the needs of industry' (2002, p 6)

Although earlier discussions initiated by DEST (then DETYA) and ANTA sought to 'take stock' of work being conducted on the KCs and generic skills generally, ACCI and BCA were proactive in arguing for the need to take account more explicitly of industry views as they pertained to generic skills. One account of this development is that they raised the issue because they felt that the Commonwealth 'dropped the ball' in the way that the effort of implementation was not actively pursued.

The motivations of senior staff within ACCI & BCA to influence the policy system at that particular point in time are complex and difficult to ascertain. Clearly relevant are their views on the balance between technical and general skills within current VET policy settings. Also relevant are the dynamics of industry politics and matters of personal influence. Regardless, it is clear that a number of developments ensured that the issue of generic skills retained some weight among stakeholders within industry. Chief among those was the Australian Industry Group Report *Training for the Future* (AIG 2000), which had a significant effect on the relevance of generic skills, not only in terms of how employer demand for generic skills was clearly articulated within the report itself, but also in terms of the significance ascribed to it by a range of agencies and stakeholders in the VET system.

Clearly also influencing the views of industry was the extensive body of literature and opinion that considered the skills needs of industry in relation to emerging forms of work and work organisation. While similar trends had been identified at the time of Mayer and the development of the Key Competencies, views among stakeholders suggest that there is a common belief that these new skill demands have become more clearly visible and more justifiable in the scope and depth of their relevance to industry across and within industries. Despite contrary views from the literature (see for example Briggs & Kittay 2000, Livingstone 1999), there exists a solid body of work that points to changing patterns of skill use and demand within labour markets, patterns that identify growing demand for so called generic skills. The funding of the Employability Skills project late in 2000, can thus be viewed as an indication of industry becoming more adept at articulating clearly what it wants from the education & training system, and indicates yet again the willingness of government to deal with peak industry bodies outside the framework in place through Industry Training Advisory Bodies.

In the same way that the issue of generic skills had remained on the radar of industry groups and employers, the ongoing interest from within the NCVER is also worth noting. Advice from NCVER staff suggests that they were cognisant of market research from the USA (for example Carnevale & Rose 1998), local NCVER employer surveys and additional unpublished ACCI material that showed demand for so called generic skills not only from larger businesses, but also from SMEs. With the intention in part of providing some balance to any evolving approach, the NCVER funded a range of studies (Hagar 1998a, Moy 1999, Dumbrell et al 2001, Kearns 2001) in addition to including generic skills within the research priorities for projects funded through the National Research and Evaluation Committee (NREC). In the views of one senior staffer, the NCVER was 'wanting to move away from Mayer, to update it and renew it' (*2, p 3) with the result that 'the push from NCVER and business has led to things getting back on track' (*2, p 4)

These positions resonated with more broadly held opinions that the skills focus within VET is currently too sharply focussed on technical aspects. Whereas in the past so called generic skills might have been considered an added option, these developments suggest that they are becoming more mainstream, at least in the eyes of some stakeholders, and that the impetus for addressing them more meaningfully is now considered more urgent. While this position marginalises Mayer and his development of the Key Competencies to some extent, the more focussed demand from industry may have a greater effect, perhaps because of the greater demand, but also perhaps because industry is more clearly articulating to government what it wants. Thus the argument goes, if clearer statements come from business, then the leadership of schools and state training agencies will recognise the current demand in ways that they did not at the time of Mayer.

While this outcome might eventuate, the response of the states should not be underestimated. In the case of the VET sector at least, there appears to be more support from ANTA now than there was when the Key Competencies might have been more fully implemented.

Despite the significant ongoing work by Down (1997, 1998, 2000) and Down & Fechner (1997, 1998) it appears that ANTA has only recently been in a position to commit resources internally to rethink generic skills within the current training frameworks. While the ANTA discussion paper on general vocational qualifications (McDonald 2000) connected the issue of generic skills with that of pre-vocational training, it also noted that one of the reasons for the intractability of this issue is that 'it has proven difficult, if not impossible, to solve at one stroke all of the issues that are embedded within it' (2000, p 4). Notwithstanding that caution, the discussion paper clearly suggests the possibility of general vocational qualifications as well as the further development of approaches to embed the new employability skills within training packages.

So while generic skills appear on the verge of re-entering policy debates in a more substantive way, it is worth noting one of the conclusions of a recent international comparative study that analysed generic skills frameworks in 12 OECD countries (Trier 2001). This report argues that because of fundamental tensions between assessment and learning inherent in notions of generic skills, particular attention should be given to developing clear aims and objectives prior to developing innovations in learning and assessment. Relatedly, Cornford (2002) fears that the views of educators will once again be excluded by employers and policy makers as they consider generic skills afresh, and in doing so ignore the fact that generic skills is fundamentally about effective learning and transfer.

While the employability skills report is currently in draft form, the project has sought to develop:
- possible new requirements for generic employability competencies required by industry;
- clear definitions that will deal with inconsistencies of terminology;
- a report on the case studies that informed the project; and
- a proposed suite of employability skills including an outline of assessment, certification and reporting options.

It is arguable that the report appears to have been focussed more on issues of definition rather than more important questions of assessment and reporting. Indeed comments from persons associated with the project suggest that 'by being obsessed with definitional issues, and not involving teachers and their views', the project was 'in danger of creating a worse framework than that in put in place through Mayer' (*24, p 2)

As at March 2002, the report was in the process of being approved by the Minister for Education, Training & Science, then would be released for consideration by the relevant sector stakeholders. While the report recommends that the November MCEETYA meeting should consider its recommendations, it appears that ANTA will use it alongside the recent (NREC) projects and

other work separately commissioned on employability skills within training packages to develop a policy approach that will be presented to the National Quality Training Committee (NQTC). Hopefully, some debate will occur prior to policy decisions being made.

The Policy Process: What do the Key Competencies Tell Us?

The story of the Key Competencies, and generic skills more generally, reflects many general understandings about policy and policy making evident in the literature, albeit within a specifically Australian context that is unmistakably shaped by the different forms of federalism that operate in schools, VET and universities (Lingard 1995). So what does the policy literature say, and how does that assist us in thinking about generic skills within Australian education & training?

Within the literature on policy and policy analysis, policy is generally considered to be more than the substantive actions, products or texts of a particular administration or government. Ball (1994) in identifying policy as both text and discourse warns against 'making unexamined assumptions about policy as things; policies are also processes and outcomes' (1994, p 15). The ambiguity inherent in such a claim is acknowledged by Ball himself who concedes his 'own theoretical uncertainties about the meaning of policy', and suggests that 'one of the conceptual problems lurking within much policy research and policy sociology is that more often than not analysts fail to define conceptually what they mean by policy' (1994, p 15). Taylor et al (1997) have attempted to clarify some of these uncertainties by making some general observations about policy that highlights a range of themes relevant to the Key Competency story. They suggest that:
- Policy is more than the text.
- Policy is multi dimensional.
- Policy is value laden.
- Policies exist in context.
- Policy making is a state activity.
- Policies in different fields interact.
- Policy implementation is never straightforward.
- Policies result in unintended as well as intended consequences (1997, p 15).

While these generalisations are of use in establishing some boundaries around the concept of policy, it also demonstrates that policy is not a static entity and that the scope of the definition is broad. Ball (1994) for example believes that we can see policies as 'representations which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actors' interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context' (1994, p 16).

Taylor et al (1997) have highlighted the politics of policy. They suggest that 'politics is involved in the recognition of a problem which requires a policy response, through the formulation and implementation stages, including changes made along the way' (1997, p 24). On occasion, political conflicts embedded in policy statements can 'drive disputes to lower levels and result in a myriad of adjustments, compromises, and continued periodic conflicts' (Yeatman 1998, p 25) as witnessed by my own unsuccessful attempts at introducing a more meaningful approach to integrating Key Competencies into the agriculture training package in 1997.

The politics of the policy process also plays itself out through the practical consequences of particular policies being less important to policymakers than articulating positions and building alliances (Elder and Cobb 1983). Relatedly, Yeatman (1990) has noted that social policies 'are not responses to actual problems already formed and 'out there', but that they 'constitute the

problems to which they seem to be responses'. In this way, they 'are involved in problem setting, the setting of agendas' (1990, p 158). Stronach & MacLure (1997) reinforce this perspective in suggesting that what counts as a 'policy solution' is increasingly being driven by a desire to be seen to act by answering symbolically to 'a need to dramatise a political response' rather than solve a problem (1997, p 88). These conceptions of policy resonate most strongly with some readings of the generic skills agenda, and suggest caution when considering the real nature the demand for such skills.

It is clear from the literature that policy is far too complex to be defined and achieved in simple technicist ways, and that while paternalistic and control-oriented models of policy have by no means disappeared, they have lost legitimacy (Yeatman 1998, p 24).

Policy is then more than a substantive text or document. Policies are 'always incomplete insofar as they relate or map on to the wild profusion of local practice' (Ball 1994, p 10). Such post-structuralist perspectives also consider policy to be rearticulated and re-contextualised across the policy cycle (Fulcher 1989) where knowledge from practice may feed into ongoing modifications to the policy text (Taylor et al 1997). In this way, conceptions of policy processes are often complicated by the reality that they are occurring in a number of different arenas (Fulcher 1989) in a number of different ways. This interpretation of policy is particularly relevant to the generic skills agenda in Australia, where in a number of cases across the states and territories, generic skills are given statues and value in substantive policy texts without the corresponding resources and focus in practice. Thus policy on Key Competencies has evolved differently in each context and continues to evolve as it is reinterpreted and reapplied.

When considering policy as a process, the role of individuals within that process is highlighted. Yeatman (1998) suggests that for the conception of policy as a policy process to be possible, the work of the state administration has to be conceived democratically. In that way, the personal agency of individuals at all stages of the process is put in the foreground. Ball (1993) has noted that when the delivery of policy is 'seen to be contingent on the culture and practice of the providers and service deliverers', it is possible to see them as 'central to ensuring that policy gets delivered in ways which make sense to those who use it' (1993, p 67). This has neither always been the case in the development of local VET policy, nor specifically in relation to generic skills for example, in terms of their representation within competency standards.

In addition to the issue of agency, there is also the question of context. Where does the policy process begin and end? Within their conception of the policy cycle, Bowe et al (1992) refer to three inter-related contexts, p the context of policy text production, the context of practice and the context of influence (1992, p 20). Ball (1994) extends this framework by adding the context of outcomes and the context of political strategy. Clearly then, a richer understanding of policy recognises that there are multiple contexts of policy (Ball 1994) that involve the participation of 'all those involved in policy all the way through points of conception, operational formulation, implementation, delivery on the ground, consumption and evaluation' (Yeatman 1998, p 43). Thus as noted by McIntyre and Wickert (2000), 'policy is a dynamic process that engages multiple participants in a range of contexts' (2000, p 163).

It is worth noting also that in the last decade in particular, policy activity has increased markedly. Yeatman (1998) notes that 'the areas of social life which are subject to "policy" have grown extraordinarily' (1998, p 18) and McIntyre & Wickert (2000) have identified similar sentiments in the literature reflecting policy 'hysteria' (Stronach & Morris 1994); 'turbulence' and 'epidemic' (Levin 1998); 'waves of reform' (Stronach & MacLure 1997) and 'rage' (Silver 1990). McIntyre & Wickert see this intensification of policy activity as being reflective of 'the challenges of postmodernity' (2000, p 162), and cite Hargreaves (1996) who has recognised that

policy has become part of the moving mosaic of the postmodern performance. This phenomenon is well known to VET practitioners in Australia.

Thus the story of the Key Competencies and Employability skills resonates in many ways with the literature. The process of developing a generic skills agenda in Australian VET has not been a discrete and rational phenomenon. With generic skills, industry and government have been in the business of managing policy as it has shifted, gained and lost favour, and been redefined across contexts.

Aspects of the Current International Context

The return of a generic skills agenda within Australian VET has some interesting parallels with current international developments. Since the end of 1997 the OECD through its DeSeCo Project has been grappling with the question, 'Beyond reading, writing and computing, what competencies and skills are relevant for an individual to lead a successful and responsible life and for society to face the challenges of the present and future?' (Rychen, 2001).

This ambitious effort reflects the OECD's recent shift away from reporting on educational outputs (i.e. qualifications and years of schooling attained) to a focus on educational outcomes (i.e. skills and attributes developed). Governments are clearly interested in ways of analysing the effectiveness of their policies, and the development of indicators to inform international comparisons among OECD member countries is not a phenomena restricted to education. Indeed, despite doubts about the conceptual soundness of indicator programs, the reality of indicator work is that it provides national government with 'hard facts' with which to argue for investments in particular programs. While indicators have in effect thus provided a context of reform for national governments, there remains resistance among member countries to the idea that indicators might also provide the content of national reforms, a concern acknowledged locally within the NCVER.

The significance of the DeSeCo project was recently illustrated at the 2nd International DeSeCo symposium through the presence of senior representatives from a range of international organisations. UNESCO and other UN agencies, the ILO, the World Bank, the European Union, and APEC all had delegates at the conference along with most OECD member countries. What was apparent from the symposium presentations was that key agencies such as the ILO and the World Bank are increasingly integrating targets related to skills and education within the projects that they negotiate with client countries. Frameworks that include cross curricula outcomes are being encouraged, as witnessed by the ILO and its Model Core Work Skills (MCWS) project and the ongoing development of Regional Model Competency Standards (RMCS) under development through projects in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Southern Africa.

These developments suggest that debates surrounding generic skills / key qualifications / cross curricula outcomes are likely to continue, particularly as the rhetoric surrounding 'knowledge workers', 'high performance workplaces' and 'the new economy' continue to feature in the literature surrounding education and training. Indeed the work occurring through DeSeCo has provided a reference point for the Commonwealth that has in the past shown itself to be willing to draw on work from the OECD.

Notwithstanding these developments, it is worth noting, as has Kearns (2001), that there is evidence from around the world of a broad spectrum of unresolved issues in integrating generic skills successfully in teaching and learning strategies, both in VET and school institutions, as well as the workplace. Lets hope that some of these issues are more fully explored before another incomplete framework is introduced.

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*   This paper also includes material drawn from interviews conducted as part of a current Ph.D program. Direct quotes have not been fully referenced as clearance is yet to be obtained from participants. They have thus been cited by showing the respondent number and the transcript page from which the quote is drawn eg, p (2, p 4) for respondent 2 page 4, and (24, p 3) for respondent 24 page 3.