

From the learners' perspective: a case study of VET Graduates

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Abstract

Policy discussions and texts related to generic skills, variously referred to as key skills, competencies, employability skills, and graduate outcomes, share a tendency to foreground the needs of employers and industry (e.g. Employability Skills Report, 2002). A related policy concern to getting the skill mix 'right' is responding to Australia's skills shortage, again, by being led by the needs of industry and employer groups (see eg., *Skilling Australia*, DEST 2005). This paper proposes that VET graduates' perceptions of their needs, their responses to training and their experiences at work provide valuable insights to policy discussions of these issues in two ways: the ongoing development of generic skills training and more generally, to enhancing the contribution of skilled workers to organisations.

This paper reports on research conducted for a case study of a communication course, composed of many generic skills, in a (TAFE, NSW) Diploma of property (Real Estate) program. A longitudinal survey of the first cohort of thirty students in 2003 used methods including written course evaluations and interviews (both telephone and face-to-face in-depth), observations and systemic data on students' backgrounds to track how students fared both during the program and one year after graduating.

The findings revealed that students' motivation for undertaking the diploma were mixed and this was reflected in their diverse outcomes. They confirm that communication training is most effective when it develops generic skills in authentic work-related contexts. However, these graduates acknowledged the significant role of organisational learning in meeting the communicative, interpersonal and cognitive demands of their professional, flexible and evolving careers. The findings provide insights to how the relation between organisational and institutional learning could be developed. It reveals these graduates sought personal fulfilment in work and cared about their contribution to society. It is proposed that in order to optimise the mutual benefit that skilled workers can bring to organisations, policy discussions could consider more the role of employers and managers in meeting the needs of new graduates.

1. Introduction

Discussions of generic skills and related concepts such as key competencies (Mayer 1992), basic skills (Curtis 2004: 27) and employability skills (Curtis 2004; DEST 2002) have long had resonance for communication training. Mayer's seven key competencies are explicitly or implicitly communicative activities.¹ Descriptions of employability skills and graduate outcomes list communication as a core skill including, for example, 'listening and understanding, speaking clearly and directly, writing clearly, negotiating responsively, reading independently, empathising and persuading' (DEST 2002). Generally, the goal of communication courses in TAFE programs has been to develop students' generic (communication) skills for specific industry or workplace contexts.

¹ They include collecting, analysing and organizing information, communicating ideas and information, planning and organising activities, working with others, solving problems, using mathematical ideas and techniques and using technology (Mayer 1992)

This paper reports on the communication course in a Diploma of Property (Real Estate) program. This component consisted of modules entitled: corporate presentation, customer relations, lead or facilitate work teams, workplace learning environment, property reports and meetings (TAFE, NSW 2002). These modules were contextualised for the real estate industry sector and facilitated learning and development of many of the generic skills, behaviours and attributes described in the above policy texts. The research subjects were (a cohort of) thirty students, in a city campus of TAFE, NSW, during 2003. A longitudinal survey with four points of data collection was used to examine the students' backgrounds, needs and feedback on the program. The discussion focuses on the findings of the follow-up survey, conducted one year after the completion of training, which revealed the graduates' experiences and reflections on the intervening year and in the job. The purpose of the analysis was to identify the relevance and value of the communication training to the graduates and particularly to those working in real estate. As this was the first intake in a new program, it was expected the findings would identify ways in which the course could be developed.

The survey reveals that graduates found aspects of the communication training applicable to their workplaces and in these respects reported feeling prepared for the demands of the job. In other areas, such as negotiating and closing sales, gaps were recognised. These graduates were seeking personal fulfilment in work and one expression of this was the expectation of learning new skills and expertise. When graduates felt they were learning, they spoke of wanting to stay with the organization. Evidence from the study suggests that in other ways, the culture of the industry sector was not conducive to encouraging graduates to remain employed in real estate. This paper explores the convergence between organisational and institutional learning in relation to enhancing the development of VET graduates' generic skills capabilities. In respect to real estate, it is argued that employers and managers could do more to encourage skilled workers to stay in the industry sector.

2. Literature Review

Within the VET sector, both the significance and nature of generic skills have become increasingly recognised and understood. In a context of changing economic conditions, industries and workplaces, the adaptability and transfer of generic skills have come to be seen as important and needed. The High Level Review of training packages' recommendation that they be repositioned 'front and centre' (Schofield 2003) was reinforced by the report on 'Employability Skills' (DEST 2002). This position has been taken up in revisions to the Training Package Development Handbook (DEST 2005b). Generic skills, now explicitly addressed, are much less likely than previously to be sidelined or perceived as add-ons to training programs that can be safely ignored.

Further, our understanding of the complexity and depth of generic skills has steadily developed. The Employability Skills report contributed by arguing that earlier models, incorporating communication, critical thinking, problem solving and interpersonal understandings needed to be expanded with the inclusion of learning and self management (DEST 2002). There has been growing awareness of the role of attributes and behaviours. For example, Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007: 282) drawing on

Goleman (1998: 4) include emotional intelligence, 'defined as a capacity to reason about emotions', in a model of employability. Similarly, Wakefield's (2005) analysis of higher order thinking skills, information processing skills, reasoning skills, enquiry skills, creative thinking skills, and evaluation skills (Eurdyice 2002, cited in Wakefield) have been seen as requirements not only of higher education outcomes (see McBeath 2003) but as well of VET graduate outcomes. These understandings align with developments in the literature regarding the demands of work and requirements of skilled workers to be professional, e.g., regulations calling for real estate agents to act more competently and professionally (Office of Fair Trading 2003).

Our understanding of how to effectively teach generic skills has become more mainstream with explicit requirements for them to be contextualised. While this has long been recognized by practitioners (ACTRAC 1995; O'Hara & Deveney 1991; Smith 1995) it has perhaps re-entered policy texts, and been reaffirmed that 'contextualising makes learning more meaningful... [that] people learn best when learning is immediately identified as relevant... [and that content is] relevant when learning activities are based on concrete examples or actual work activities' (DEST 2005a).

The role of workplace learning in meeting the needs of industry and economy for a skilled workforce is another significant theme of this discussion. McIntyre (2004: 4) has recognised the need for research to develop our understanding of issues such as how workplace learning occurs and how some organizations create a culture, which encourage learning. He recommends that social theories be used to investigate organisational culture, relationships and networks, citing the work of Poell, van der Krogt & Wildermeersch (1999). An example of such research is the 'Strategic partnerships with industry research and training (SPIRT) program, reported on by Solomon et al (2001). In fields of management and organisational communication, this subject has long been theorised. Reasons why organisations need to develop a culture of 'continuous learning' have been described, e.g. by Schacter (2007; see also Lucas 2002). In this discussion, the relation between workplace learning and institutional learning, i.e. how they can interact and mutually develop, is tentatively theorized.

This discussion reviews the relative status and roles of various VET sector stakeholders. Policy texts tend to foreground the needs of industry and the economy in advising that VET directions be 'industry led'. Practitioners, somewhat alternatively, recognize the needs of students, summed up in Moodie's (2004) address to an AVETRA conference advocating teachers and students as 'at the heart of VET'. In discussions of policy makers (see e.g. DEST) about meeting the skills shortage, the rationale for why it matters is presented as 'Australian businesses estimate the most significant challenge to ongoing economic growth is the need for more skilled workers to meet demand' (Skilling Australia 2005). One of the outcomes of the report is the endorsement of a National Industry Advisory Group whose role is to 'provide a business and industry perspective in papers presented at ministerial council meetings'.

An aspect of the response by industry and employers to the skills shortage could well be to explore ways of encouraging skilled workers to stay in jobs and within industry

sectors where needed. Even if there were little evidence currently of a skills shortage in real estate, the industry sector will have to deal with the critical situation in related industries, such as the building industry, where it is predicted that 100,000 skilled employees will leave (Houston & Leung 2005), many lured by higher wages in competing industries, such as mining. While many industrialized countries face a skills shortage, Lewis (2007) in the US, attributes the situation partly to 'faulty domestic economic policy' which 'creates stagnant wages, increased wage disparities, and offshored jobs'. He advocates the approach developed by Washington, DC-based Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), arguing that public policy should encourage employers to deal with the pressures of globalization and competition by offering 'job quality' to their workers. The evidence from this study suggests that policy discussions could consider more how aspects of need to be addressed by the real estate sector in order to retain VET graduates.

3. Research Method

A longitudinal survey was conducted of the first class (thirty students) to undertake the Diploma of Property in 2003, in an Institute of TAFE, NSW. Four collection points included an initial survey drawing on an informally conducted needs analysis, short interviews and observations, and data from TAFE's class management system (CLAMS). Information was sought on students' backgrounds in terms of previous education, ethnicity, age and reasons for entering the program. The second point was a student feedback survey, using anonymously written responses, conducted at the end of the first semester. The third was an end of course survey, drawing on CLAMS data and feedback gathered from class discussions. The final collection point, conducted a year after the completion of training, consisted of a follow-up survey by telephone and in-depth interview. Around ten telephone interviews and seven in-depth interviews were conducted and details on other students were gathered anecdotally or from the researcher's recorded observations. Interview questions probed the graduates' aspirations and values, including their achievements since graduating and goals for the future; their experience in employment, in particular in real estate; their reflections on their job and what they had learned; the ways and extent to which they had found the communication training useful; and their recommendations for developing the program further.

4. Findings and Discussion

Students' Backgrounds

This group of thirty students consisted of seventeen males and thirteen females. Fifteen had completed the HSC in the previous year and another five had done so within the last three years, together constituting two thirds as recent school leavers. The other third were mature-age, coming to the program with varied experience in education, employment and life. Six students were between their mid-twenties and mid-thirties and had experience of other levels of education and fields of employment, one having completed a degree in architecture in Columbia, and two others having completed one to two years in degree programs, before discontinuing. Four (including three female) students were aged forty and over. Only six students had English as

their first language. A high proportion of the group had varied cultural backgrounds, with parents born overseas and language backgrounds other than English. These language backgrounds may be a contributory factor to the literacy levels in the group being generally lower than those found in higher education settings. Many had not achieved the HSC results sought and had settled on this program as other than their first choice.

Among them, the level of competence (and confidence) in written English was generally lower than in speaking. Possibly, their choice of real estate had been influenced by a perception that agents needed better spoken communication skills than written. Together with more developed speaking skills, these students tended to demonstrate well-developed interpersonal skills and outgoing, for some, extroverted personalities. At least fifty percent of the group expressed both an interest in property and intention to work in the industry sector. At least three students had completed work experience in a real estate agency, while at school, and had responded positively. Similarly, two others had worked as agency receptionists and planned to pursue a career in real estate. Some were interested if not solely concerned with real estate contexts, expressing a preference for the training to be relevant and industry focused, and a tendency to devalue or exhibit disinterest in any activity or topic not directly related. Others had not decided and were looking for broader contexts, such as business or more academic settings. Some had a relatively deeper understanding and appreciation of communication and interest in developing their generic' skills. For them, any activity involving interaction with others was seen as a learning opportunity. Others saw communication as customer service skills only, in which they perceived themselves to be already competent.

Graduates' Experiences

While around fifty percent of the cohort had originally expressed an interest in working in real estate, the experience of the diploma program had not encouraged more graduates to do so. At the end of the course, twelve were intending to work in the sector. Throughout the following year, three of these had left real estate. By the time the follow-up interviews were held less than a third (nine) of the original cohort was still working in the target context. They were predominantly young males, aged between nineteen and twenty two years. The only remaining female, Chinese, aged over fifty and having migrated to Australia four years previously, was struggling. Working six days a week in a suburban real estate agency and 'mortgage originators', she spoke positively about having the position, even though her commission-based income had not been enough to live on and she was dependent on the support of her family. The issue of income appeared significant insofar as the graduates chose to talk about it as a feature of their experience in real estate.

Only one graduate suggested that his current income was more than expected. Most would probably have been earning around the award wage of less than five hundred dollars per week,² a reasonable wage for a young person still living at home and being partly supported. They seemed satisfied with their current remuneration, while at the same time having an appreciation of the financially driven 'hierarchy' in real estate:

² In 2003 the award wage for a real estate agent was \$480 per week, according to the NSW Office of Industrial Relations.

residential is thought to earn less and is consequently considered to have lower status than commercial; property management has lower status than sales. Among the young men, seven worked in residential and two were in commercial real estate, the latter considered by the others to have been particularly successful in entering this coveted, more lucrative area of the industry sector. Five worked in property leasing and management; one worked in his family agency and did property management as well as other duties. Three were employed as sales agents, two in commercial and one in residential. Most of them spoke of aspiring to the next level, or to several levels higher, and to achieving more financial rewards than they were enjoying or 'enduring' currently. Their responses to the communication course, both during the training program and to its usefulness in the job is discussed below.

This group of young males shared some strikingly similar characteristics. From the outset of the training program, several had expressed an interest in property and real estate, having completed work experience at school in real estate agencies. Generally, these trainees' restless behaviour was not suited to classroom situations; they often exhibited short attention spans and showed little enthusiasm for writing tasks, which tended to require quiet concentration. They enjoyed interaction with other students and active tasks such as role-plays and simulations. They may have been more visually oriented than aurally, learning through observing rather than through listening. Often, these students would lose interest in group-activities relatively quickly. In some ways the learning appeared to occur incidentally. For example, Jerry, the youngest interviewee (nineteen years), recalled that one of the most useful aspects of the communication training had been the insights he had gained to body language, which he drew on when showing properties to clients and in his dealings with them. Hence, generic skills training appears to have been most effective for these learners when it was clearly and relevantly contextualised, based more on spoken than written activities, involved a visual element, was relatively active and well-paced, allowing minimal scope for students to 'get off-track'.

In a number of ways they had found work to be more fulfilling and satisfying than being a student. Similarly, they appeared to value more the learning they experienced in organisational contexts than that at TAFE and to be more suited to learning at work than to institutional learning. In some respects, performance in the program was not a reliable indicator of performance on the job. One graduate commented that even though he had not done particularly well as a student, he felt much more successful in his work and was happy that towards the end of his first year, he had earned enough to buy a new car - 'It just goes to show you don't need top marks to do well in the job'. On the other hand, another graduate, Paul, had achieved the highest marks and been awarded the best student at the TAFE graduation ceremony for 2003, and yet had found his job as a marketing manager for an agency in Double Bay unrewarding. After six months he had sought and found alternative employment in the travel industry. Short sketches from a small sample of individual graduates will be discussed below.

Jerry

In Jerry's case, work challenged him in ways the training program neither did nor could. Employed in a franchised agency in western Sydney, he conveyed an impression of being very satisfied in a job that was meeting significant personal needs, including professional, financial and social. At the interview he was smartly

dressed in a white shirt and tie, looking both more confident and directed, than he had been as a student. He enjoyed good relations with his clients, advising them on property management, tenants and legal issues, and had been able to explain property-related Acts and Regulations. He aspired to representing the agency at the Consumer, Traders and Tenants Tribunal. He said his income (the award wage plus commission) was reasonable as he had been able to meet targets of twenty new leases per month. He described the staff as generally young, sharing similar cultural backgrounds and regularly socialising together. Jerry expressed fulfilment in the job and felt committed to staying with the company and in the industry sector, planning to move within two to three years into commercial/industrial agency work. He recommended the training program maintain a strict focus on real estate, suggesting that work experience in an agency be made compulsory. Another aspect of the training he described as useful was the negotiation skills. It did seem however, that for him more effective learning was occurring in the workplace.

Ari

Two years older than Jerry, Ari (at twenty one) also evoked an impression that work in real estate had offered him personal satisfaction, challenge and scope for learning and development. By 'industry standards' he had indeed been successful, gaining work as a sales agent without having previous experience, albeit in Sydney's south-west, where competition is not as daunting as closer to the city or in the east. He was very aware of and articulate about the aspects of the communication training that he felt had prepared him well for work. They included generic skills and attributes such as emotional intelligence and understanding the role of ethics, in particular, respect. Ari described his approach to developing relationships with clients, which involved using his communication skills to find out about property buyers' needs, to demonstrate his knowledge and expertise in property and in matching the client's needs to the agency's stock of listed properties. He was explicit about how his ethical values informed his practice, and of the need to respect clients' perspectives in order to gain their respect and to demonstrate his trustworthiness. For example, he appreciated that his Chinese clients' property needs were influenced by their adherence to *feng shui* principles and that he needed to understand how these principles applied to property.

His mature appreciation of communication was reflected in a professional attitude to the job, valuing both hard work and the opportunity to learn. His response to the downturn in the property market throughout 2004 was that it provided an opportunity for him to prove himself:

Lucky I'm young and got lots of energy. I see it as challenging, I always wanted a challenge, but also strengthened me up for the future (Ari).

He explained that when the market was buoyant, sales agents did not need to demonstrate skills or professionalism because buyers were motivated, and closing deals on sales required little effort. However, in a downturn (referred to as a buyers' market), agents required both skills and resilience to close deals.

Paul

In response to his different circumstances, Paul's attitude to the downturn in the property market was much less accommodating. He was older (thirty-four years), living independently in a relationship with a successful executive and a comfortable

lifestyle, hence, requiring a reasonable income. He described himself as an ‘over-achiever’, not only in earning ‘top marks’ as a student, but also, in aspiring to succeed in the job and being prepared to work hard. Employed on \$400.00 per week and twenty five percent of the agency fee (as a listing commission) for every property sold, in the first six months he sent five hundred letters a week and followed them up with four to five hundred phone calls every week. In that year he had achieved over two hundred appointments with potential vendors. Only two of these eventuated as listings.

Paul found the job difficult not only in terms of the level of remuneration but with the reduced level of activity in the market, simply not interesting or satisfying:

I do enjoy [sales], [but] I don’t like my particular job at the moment because it’s not challenging, it is very repetitive and the rewards aren’t there. It’s hard to get excited about something when you’re not getting anything back...

Both Ari and Paul concurred that sales skills and ‘closing’ were areas that were not adequately addressed in the training and yet needed to be. Ari was keenly aware that he needed to learn the skills to ‘become number one salesman’. While the communication training in negotiation skills had been of some use, he described it as limited, speculating that these skills were perhaps best learned in the job. Paul was more definite in identifying this as a serious gap in the training:

I don’t think there was enough direct sales stuff ... like closing ... that would be really valuable to include in the course. More sales ... more direct. Not just talking to people and communicating with them but getting them to do what you want them to do. Getting them to buy it ...

He felt that sales skills were a significant basis for many jobs and that rather than restrict the context to real estate, a broader focus in subject areas would be more worthwhile, as he had found these skills to be relevant and useful in different jobs across different industries including information technology, property and travel. This points to the limited scope of generic skills training to adequately recreate contexts in institutional settings. It is difficult to research how real estate sales are conducted as this information, understandably, is not disclosed readily. Nonetheless, further work is needed and worthwhile. The notion of sales as manipulation implied above highlights the need for training to address ethical approaches to sales.

There were other ways in which graduates experienced the exploitative nature of the industry sector. While this research evidence suggests that it suits young males with an interest in property and an attitude of starting out, so that variable income is manageable, young women seem to fare less favourably.

Clara

Clara’s (aged twenty) experience, as a young female corroborates with evidence collected from other graduates, that practises in real estate agencies can be discriminatory. The culture of the industry sector includes images of agents being seen as glamorous and ‘slick’. This is associated with women dressing and behaving in ways that appear to be attractive or appealing. In Clara’s agency, she observed that females conforming to the stereotype were perceived as successful and capable in their work. Situated in Double Bay, the agency was comparatively large, employing

ten sales agents, two of whom were female, and twenty others, including four personal assistants of which three were female.

Clara had hoped the role of personal assistant to four sales agents would apprentice her into being a sales agent. She accepted a wage of eleven dollars per hour (two dollars per hour more than she had earned as a receptionist, unqualified and with no experience), expecting, at least, to learn new skills, be part of a team and have scope to be creative. This depended on the agents accepting and cooperating with her by sharing information and giving her responsibility for tasks. Instead, the team did not function cooperatively nor include Clara in their activities. Her employment lasted just two months and her reasons for leaving were firstly that she was not learning - 'I didn't learn a thing' and secondly, the sexist nature of the workplace culture. She interpreted the role expected of her as demeaning and reacted by dressing 'down' in loose fitting, unrevealing clothes. While some colleagues ridiculed her, another confided his view that women needed to look good in order to be successful in real estate. In describing why he thought another female agent was not managing to 'close' deals (property sales) he told Clara, 'look at her, she's fat and ugly, who'd do business with that'.

Clara could not recall much from the communication training and her experience in the job illustrated a challenging cultural context that she had not been prepared for. From this research a case study describing Clara's experience has been used in subsequent courses to deal with the issue of how discriminatory practices undermine the performance of teams. This illustrates the reflexive nature of institutional and organizational learning. The experience of one graduate can be used to assist other graduates in being better prepared to deal with some of the negative aspects of real estate culture.

5. Conclusion

In many ways, these graduates represented the skilled, professional workers that real estate needs. They spoke of seeking fulfilment, whether in professional terms, of their career aspirations, being successful at the job and rewarded financially, or personally, in terms of their learning, self development and happiness. The evidence from the case study suggests that generic (communication) skills training has contributed to these outcomes. They valued developing their awareness of and skills in communication, in particular in areas including listening, non-verbal communication, in developing relationships and ethical understandings. The learning was most effective when they practised these skills in meaningful and relevant contexts. At the same time, the research has highlighted the significance for the graduates of workplace learning and indicated areas where the relationship between institutional learning and organisational learning can be developed. There are areas of real estate culture and practices not adequately addressed that need to be, including negotiating and closing sales ethically, identifying and responding to discriminatory and other undermining behaviour between colleagues. This demonstrates a reflexive relationship whereby institutional learning can both draw from and enhance the effectiveness of organisational learning.

As less than a third of the cohort was employed in real estate one year afterwards, generic skills training needs to prepare students for both the target context and other contexts. In view of the diversity and challenging nature of the academic and workplace target contexts VET students are facing, generic skills training is vital and needs, as well, to develop high level cognitive, analytical and problem-solving skills. A challenge for VET providers of generic skills training is to address these needs, even when students display less willingness to participate in more demanding learning activities.

Finally, this research proposes a more pronounced role for real estate employers and managers in addressing negative aspects of the culture and practices of agencies. In the context of the skills shortage, and a seemingly high level of staff turnover, real estate does not appear to present good prospects for a sustainable career. In order to keep VET graduates in the industry sector it is perhaps in the latter's interests to address job quality issues, such as learning opportunities and team performance.

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