

New directions for training packages

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■ **Abstract**

Quality training and assessment is an important topic in the current discussion about vocational education and training (VET). Service Skills Australia (SSA) is responsible for the development of training packages for service industries. In this role, SSA consults and engages with industry, training organisations, government and other stakeholders to develop and support the implementation of nationally recognised training products that respond to industry skill needs.

This paper will give an overview about key activities and policy reviews in the VET sector including Bradley Review of Higher Education, Skilling Australia for the future and the NQC/COAG Joint Steering Committee Consultation Paper ‘VET Training Products for the 21st Century’. The paper will then summarise trends and major issues in feedback data from industry from over a decade of training package review and development, highlighting gaps in the current discussions like the development of comprehensive evaluation framework, a re-evaluation of the way VET implements Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and the implementation of a truly nationally consistent training and education system that responds to the needs of industry. The paper will combine this with further research SSA has undertaken with industry to develop the Service Industries 2009 Environmental Scan and through its continuous improvement projects. Furthermore, the paper will look towards the design and implementation of “next generation” training packages, and provide some thoughts on what these products could/should look like.

■ Introduction

There is currently an abundance of reviews of Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system. Many political bodies are showing an interest in the VET system and have launched projects to analyse the current structure. This paper will:

- Overview key activity and policy reviews in the VET sector
- Describe SSA's response to these reviews and industry expectations

This paper will focus on training packages but will also argue that training package activity and policy evolution occurs within a complex context and the ISC's reaction to this is to respond in an equally comprehensive manner.

■ Literature review

The Rudd Government has shown a strong commitment to an industry-led VET system. The ALP 2007 Election Policy Document "Skilling Australia for the future" states "new [VET] places will be delivered in a more industry-driven system, ensuring that training is more responsive to the needs of businesses and individuals..." (p9) and further (p.14): "[The] new delivery mechanism will focus on the current, emerging and future skills required by industry." And "This industry-led system means that...providers will be compelled to deliver training which is more responsive to the needs of industry."(p.15) ^[1]

On 29 November 2008 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed that \$6.7 billion will be provided under the National Skills and Workforce Development Agreement to increase the skills levels of Australians.

COAG's Productivity Agenda, amongst other things, aims to deliver:

- Reforms to the delivery of vocational education and training, at school, for jobseekers and to current workers to ensure our current and future skills are met.

The National Quality Council (a sub-committee of COAG) also launched a “VET Training Products for the 21st Century” project to reflect the broader context of the policy objectives identified by COAG for the VET sector.

In the initial consulting phase of the project, the following were identified as strengths in the current system:

- Current approaches to competence relate clearly to workplace and job roles, which are understood by industry and can be defined and assessed in a consistent and non subjective manner;
- Directly aligning competency standards and qualifications through national training packages facilitates national recognition, national consistency, and portability and ensures that competency standards and the means by which they are delivered meet industry requirements if effectively implemented;
- The current process for developing and endorsing national training packages ensures that there is broad consultation with both industry and providers and the endorsement process ensures that outcomes are accepted across Australia and also internationally; and
- Diverse learner needs can be accommodated within national training packages with effective delivery and assessment, recognising that there are many units under any competency model which can only be effectively assessed in a workplace context.

The following were identified by the VET Training Products review as weaknesses. Many of the identified weakness’ SSA would hold as strengths:

- Current approaches to defining competency focus mainly on tasks and roles related to occupational competence and are not sufficient in building foundation skills and the broader personal competencies required to achieve the COAG outcomes;

Industry would hold that a) focus on work is a strength of the system and, that b) foundation skills can be developed as part of the development of broader personal competencies. For instance, units of competency at Australian Quality Framework (AQF) levels 2 and 3 in the service industries will often encompass employability

skills of communication, team work etc and accommodate the diverse variety of literacy and numeracy levels that often occur in the service sectors.

- Directly aligning and mandating units of competence and qualifications through national training packages limits provider responsiveness and flexibility;

Currently training providers are able to pull together a wide variety of units of competencies together to meet industry needs. Service industries qualifications have flexibility in core and elective structures that allow for provider responsiveness and flexibility.

- The current national training package development and endorsement process is too lengthy and cumbersome to address changing needs and may not address the needs of some individual enterprises;

Training packages are no longer going through the three to five yearly review process. They now go through a “continuous improvement” process that is far more responsive to the needs of industry. Updates to the training package standards now can occur on the basis of feedback from industry. Critically, this responsive process has many supporters in industry. What we are finding is that we need to be mindful in our work of not putting through too many changes through the implementation channel (State Training Authorities/providers) for feedback that this may be too overwhelming for the system. Further to this point, it is the experience of SSA that the needs of individual enterprises are often easily accommodated by training packages. The inflexibilities in the system often arise through implementation issues such as funding, auditing and other policy issues.

- National training package qualifications are most relevant to learners in work-based learning pathways and are less appropriate to other VET learners, questioning whether competence can be consistently and reliably assessed across learner groups and learning pathways; and

Industry requires skilled labour able to undertake activity in a work context – regardless of what diverse pathway the learner comes to industry, in the end, it is about the skilled work that they undertake in an employment context.

- National training package requirements and possibilities are not fully understood and consistently interpreted.^[2]

SSA agrees that the nature and requirements of training packages are not readily understood. SSA makes a concerted effort to effectively communicate how training packages should be used – but more needs to be done. SSA works with State Training Authorities (STA), public and private providers and employers. One of the key messages of this communication is that training packages are not curriculum – they are not only about training. They incorporate assessment and they are descriptions of work and what tasks and activities should contribute to an outcome.

In addition, the Bradley Review of Higher Education was instigated by the Hon Julia Gillard MP (Minister for Education) in March 2008. The final report was released on the 12th of December and made 46 recommendations, including:

- Expanded Tertiary Sector – the scope of Australia’s “higher education system” should encompass VET sector qualifications and traditional tertiary degrees. This will need to be underpinned by an improved “scope and coordination of labour market intelligence so that it covers the whole of the tertiary sector”^[3]
- That the Australian Government adopt a framework for higher education accreditation, quality assurance and regulation featuring an independent national regulatory body responsible for regulating all types of tertiary education.^[4]

The evolution of the Bradley Review is of importance. SSA is strongly supportive of a more integrated national system. Australia’s labour market is national and any system must support this at both policy and implementation level. The way that VET and higher education speaks to each other should be seamless. Bradley suggests a strong integration between the current VET and tertiary sector with the current higher education sector. The different drivers of VET and higher education—industry-driven versus student choice, competency-based versus curriculum based, labour-market responsive versus academically driven – and the ingrained perceptions of each sector by the other make this a challenging task.

■ Findings and discussion

Service Skills Australia, as the industry skills council for the service industries, sees several points which are not addressed appropriately in the above mentioned reviews. SSA and its stakeholders are concerned that much of the ongoing thinking within the VET sector has been focused on training package design, at the expense of a more broad-ranging examination of the infrastructure for educational vocation and training, and how effectively they are meeting the needs of industry and the broader skilling agenda.

SSA's experience in developing training packages is that the vast majority of issues are driven by the policies and programs that drive the implementation of training packages, at both state and Commonwealth levels. These include issues around the funding and resourcing of registered training organisations (RTOs), funding of individual units and qualifications, AQTF compliance issues. Under specific VET delivery programs, such as international students and VET in Schools, additional factors complicate the picture further. This complexity and inconsistency remains a pressing issue for both industry and registered training organisations.

Industry also frequently sees its standards devalued through delivery and assessment that is not conducted in accordance with industry requirements, and which does not develop graduates to the required level of workplace competence. Industry sees its qualifications adopted for pathways that it does not support, and for learner groups for which the qualifications were never intended.

While there are definitely problems with the use of training packages a re-design is not the adequate solution.

Issue reported by SSA's stakeholders are often not related to the design or construct of 'training packages'; instead, these relate to the ways in which training packages have been implemented, without sufficient attention to the institutional and human resource requirements that are needed to support effective use. Training packages are not curriculum. They define an outcome (what a skilled person can do), but are not prescriptive about inputs (how the skills and knowledge are developed). Curriculum is developed by individual

trainers/assessors or at RTO level, in line with client needs, to support the required flexibility.

Until recently, the Bradley Review and “VET Training products for the 21st century” have had minimal input from industry. A final position on these reviews is emerging. Key messages in this debate are:

- The end user and customer of the nation’s vocational system is industry as they are the employers and drivers of the nation’s productivity;
- Industry requires skilled labour able to undertake activity in a work context regardless of what diverse pathway the learner comes to industry. In the end, it is about the skilled work that they undertake in an employment context;
- The labour market is a national labour market and any system must support this. The notion that courses and qualifications can be made to suit local/regional areas is counter to this proposition; and
- Industry agrees that the training system and its products must evolve to meet the needs of the 21st century. However, above all, it must be a nationally consistent, industry led system.

Despite describing VET reform as part of their “Productivity Agenda”, at no stage does COAG give their definition of what “productivity” means in this context. Our research and consultation with industry shows that for some sectors definitions of productivity are both elusive and disparate. Others have produced working definitions of the term but there is no consistency across the sectors covered by SSA, let alone industry as a whole. Without a common understanding and definition of what productivity means and how it is measured it will be impossible to objectively measure whether the changes proposed below will make any difference.

Apart from these reviews, the National Quality Council (NQC) will be undertaking other reviews as part of implementing their work plan. Work is in three areas: quality (and measures of success), training packages and workforce development.

Projects that focus on the **Quality of VET** include:

- Monitoring and evaluating the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) 2007 to ensure more appropriate regulation of education and training providers;
- Identifying and reporting on key issues and trends in the operation of AQTF 2007; and
- Undertaking an independent review of registering and course accreditation bodies' performance against the AQTF 2007 standards^[5]. This will allow the NSC to identify and support opportunities to improve the quality and national consistency of registration, audit and course accreditation practices.

Projects that focus on **VET training packages** include:

- Implementing new training package endorsement, review and modification processes so that industry can rapidly address emerging skills;
- Reviewing the Training Packages Development Handbook;
- Providing greater flexibility and adaptability through the development of the next generation of training packages, and developing credit transfer arrangements between VET and the Higher Education sector; and
- Providing for the recognition of non-formal and informal workplace training involved in up- and re-skilling the workforce.

Projects that focus on **VET Workforce Development** include:

- Developing a national VET Workforce Development Strategy to complement existing strategies at state and local levels; (this project has been put on hold at this time)
- Developing and implementing a strategy to build industry confidence in the quality of assessment practices;
- Developing a national approach to the moderation of assessment within the VET sector which includes the involvement of industry; and
- Identifying, documenting and disseminating best practice and new ways of working between RTOs and industry/enterprises.^[6]

■ Conclusion

Based on feedback data from industry from over a decade of training package review and development, SSA considers necessary to complement the above mentioned strategies by:

- The development of comprehensive evaluation framework to measure the success of VET in reference to the missing consistency and coordination of benchmarks like productivity and completion rates;
- A re-evaluation of the way VET implements Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which is currently carried out in a fragmented and over-bureaucratic manner and does not reflect the fact that many products of the service industries are intangible and recognition is more often evidence than product based;
- A hard look at the quality of VET in Schools, with special consideration of employment outcomes and student transition into programs within the TAFE system;
- A review of the relative merits of institution-based training against apprenticeships;
- The implementation of effective measures to improve the marketing of VET to employers and individuals and
- The implementation of a truly nationally consistent training and education system that responds to the needs of industry and is based on quality outcomes & measures that are supported by industry.

Direction for the future of the role and effectiveness of training packages is emerging through public reviews. There would appear to be broad consensus from those involved in consultations that training packages work that training packages are nationally transportable and consistent descriptions of work, that provide effective bedrock for providers to develop curriculum. They have the capacity to be updated and along with the AQF provide for a variety of pathways (for example preparatory, skill sets etc). VET is about work and that is a means to productivity and the prosperity of the nation. Whilst SSA agrees with the notion that training packages should evolve. Investigations into the next steps in Australia's VET system – and training packages –

need to keep in mind how this system is about work. The way that skills around work are developed is a complex affair and investigations into the VET sector need to be systemic and targeted to the issues.

Service Skills Australia's 2009 Environmental Scan describes these issues in detail across all our sectors and provides context to a range of work that the national ISC will undertake in 2009-2010. This includes:

- An examination into industry measures of quality and the role of an ISC in quality training and assessment
- Advocate for policy implementation in education and training sector that fits the needs of the service industries
- Development of a workforce development strategy targeted to VET workers who deliver products and services to the service industries
- Thinking through the issues surrounding "completion rates" and other measures of success in the VET sector.

Apart from our ongoing work in the continuous improvement of training packages SSA will:

- Continue to expand the range and number of user guides that are produced by the ISC – tools that simply describe industry expectations for training and assessment
- Develop a recognition process and tool that is congruent to the needs of the service industries
- Undertake a range of research projects that respond to the needs and feedback from industry

All of this work will be the subject of further scrutiny and evaluation. At the end of the day, we are responding to the needs of our industry which have remained the same as they ever were – a skilled workforce that is developed through a responsive, quality

education system delivering sector specific skills development and recognition that is nationally transportable.

■ References

^[1] Rudd, Swann, Smith & Wong (2007). Skilling Australia for the future

^[2] NQC/COAG Joint Steering Committee (2008), Consultation Paper 'VET Training Products for the 21st Century', p.14

^[3] Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008). Rec. 46.

^[4] Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008). Rec. 19.

^[5] Subject to State/Territory/NARA agreement with the project brief.

^[6] NQC Work Plan 2008 MCVTE endorsed July 2008