Why VET is fragmented

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Competency-based training wasn’t seriously introduced into Australian vocational education until 1997, when training packages were introduced. We’ve been trying (and failing) to get it right ever since. I think 15 years is long enough; we need to recognise that we’ve gone about as far as we can with training packages and that it is time to consider alternatives.

We need to reform qualifications and the VET system, and we need to do these things together and not separately. At the moment, we’ve got fragmented qualifications in a fragmented system and fragmented processes of reform. The National Skills Standards Council (NSSC) is conducting two separate reviews in VET at the moment: one is of standards for the regulation of VET encompassing registered training organisations, data and registering and accrediting bodies and its focus is on quality. The other is a review of standards for the development and endorsement of training packages.

There are several problems with these reviews. The first is that they are separate and each is excluded from the scope of the other. The quality of institutions and of the qualifications they deliver are intrinsically linked, particularly when providers are policed and judged on the way they implement badly designed training packages.

The second problem is that they are secret reviews. The review of VET standards started with a discussion paper and invited submissions, but these submissions will not, as far as I know, be made public for others to read. We therefore don’t know about the nature of the advice and recommendations that the NSSC is receiving from key bodies and this advice can’t be disputed by others. Moreover, we won’t be able see the extent to which this advice is reflected in the final outcome and how different interests have been accommodated.

The second review is even less transparent. I cannot find any terms of reference, discussion paper or invitation to make submissions. While this review is the outcome of earlier work by the National Quality Council in 2009 which indicated broad directions for reform, three years have elapsed and there has been no public input on how this is to be enacted in new standards.

This is an example of what my partner Gavin Moodie (2009) refers to as the ‘democratic deficit’ in VET. In contrast to higher education which boasts ostentatious processes of consultation, VET is ‘acted upon’ after closed reviews, and this is one reason why the outcomes are so contested and highly political. Moodie argues that the public must have an opportunity to contribute to public debate about VET to improve policy outcomes, build the legitimacy of VET policy, and provide the basis for policy implementation.
Consequently, I don’t have much confidence that the current reviews are going to help much. Carving up bits means that the whole is never questioned and therefore the framework and conceptual basis of the system is not challenged. All we get are recommendations for exacting greater levels of compliance by screwing everything down more tightly with more specific and prescriptive standards. The emphasis is on stamping out dodgy practice, rather than building a quality system. Two key problems won’t be tackled: fragmentation of the VET system and fragmentation of VET qualifications.

There are about 5000 VET providers in Australia, yet most are tiny. In 2010, the biggest 100 VET providers (that is, 2% of all providers) delivered 86% of teaching, while only 61 VET providers had 1000 or more equivalent full-time students. This shows the scale and scope of the regulatory problem in VET. Millions are spent regulating a system in which 98% of providers deliver 2% of teaching. There are too many providers in VET, and the entry level is too low as demonstrated by scandals about dodgy behaviour in VET, which in turn, elicits calls for tighter regulation. Higher entry levels wouldn’t preclude serious small providers, as is illustrated in higher education where most private providers are relatively small.

We’ve also got too many qualifications in training packages. In 2010, there were about 1400 qualifications (Wheelahan 2012). Half of these qualifications had more than 34 equivalent fulltime students in all of Australia, and half had less than 34 equivalent fulltime students. Government spends millions to develop training package qualifications even though there are not many students in them, and VET providers deliver them which means they don’t have to go the expense of developing their own. This is one reason why the cost for a provider to enter VET is so low and why there are no real economies of scale in VET overall.

Some qualifications are vitally important even if they will never have high enrolments, such as statutory positions on mine sites. I am not trying to undermine safety in the mines. However, these qualifications are in the minority and given their importance, we should make specific arrangements to support them rather than organise the whole system around them, otherwise we’ve got the tail wagging the dog.

Finally, even though efforts have been made to improve the definition of competency, VET qualifications are still fragmented because, as the *Training Package Development Handbook* explains:

> Each unit of competency identifies a discrete workplace requirement and includes the knowledge and skills that underpin competency as well as language, literacy and numeracy; and occupational health and safety requirements.

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1 One criticism of this work has been that it doesn’t include delivery by private providers because their enrolment numbers aren’t published. However, even if we gave private providers the benefit of the doubt and accepted their claims that the private system is about the same size as the public system (which has yet to be demonstrated), all that would do is double these figures – so instead of the midpoint of the number of equivalent fulltime students in qualifications being 34, it would instead be 68. This is still tiny.
It is the ‘discrete workplace requirement’ that is the problem. The *Handbook* says that while knowledge should be included, elements of units of competency or performance criteria shouldn’t be entirely knowledge based unless it describes “a clear and assessable workplace outcome” and knowledge “should only be included if it refers to knowledge actually applied at work”. This means that knowledge is always contextually specific applications of knowledge, but students need principled knowledge such as maths and not just formulas. Students need to know why. As well as fragmenting learning, competency-based training fragments work which makes it harder to develop the knowledge base of practice. Moreover, in tying learning to ‘discrete workplace requirements’ as they currently exist, training packages tie learning to the present and don’t prepare students for the future. For example, the *Handbook* says:

> Language, literacy and numeracy requirements in Training Packages must reflect and not exceed the LLN skills required in the workplace to carry out particular jobs.

We need a new approach that starts with the person and the knowledge, skills and attributes they need in broadly defined occupations or vocational streams rather than discrete workplace requirements. This means rethinking the nature of qualifications, but also the way we design the system. We’ve given the current system long enough.

**References**

