The toothless tiger: Are competency-based qualifications relevant in a 21st century knowledge society?

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The putative purpose of competency-based training (CBT) is that will deliver the skills and knowledge that Australian industry needs in an increasingly competitive international economy. Its introduction was part of broader reforms to vocational education and training that were designed to achieve two objectives:

- To align educational outcomes with national economic priorities by aligning the outcomes of learning with industry requirements; and, to increase efficiency of education systems by ensuring that all learning that contributes to competency outcomes could be credentialed, including informal and non-formal learning.
- To contribute to equity. CBT is meant to credential the skills that people already have, provide them with access to new skills, and support them in pathways, particularly for disadvantaged groups.

The definition of competency has been ‘enhanced’ to accommodate concerns that previous definitions were atomistic and did not provide sufficient access to underpinning knowledge. The most recent definition of competency explains that:

> The broad concept of industry competency concerns the ability to perform particular tasks and duties to the standard of performance expected in the workplace. Competency requires the application of specified skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to effective participation in an industry, industry sector or enterprise. (DEEWR 2009)

This paper argues that CBT has not effectively achieved its designated objectives, and that the ‘enhanced’ definition, while being an improvement, does not solve the fundamental problem which is that it continues to tie knowledge to specific workplace tasks and roles.

Unlike other Anglophone countries, Australia has a highly differentiated tertiary education system with CBT in VET, and curriculum in higher education. Differentiated systems are effective when they lead to different labour market destinations that draw on the different knowledge base of each sector. However:

- VET graduates from diplomas and advanced diplomas often compete with bachelor graduates for the same positions, and diplomas are being replaced by degrees as the entry level qualification in many occupations (Foster, Delaney, Bateman and Dyson 2007; Karmel and Cully 2009);
- The ‘fit’ between qualifications and occupations is quite loose, except for regulated occupations. In 2008, only 30.3% of VET graduates reported that they
were working in the occupation directly associated with their VET qualification (NCVER 2008: Table 7):

- Most workers do not move into a different occupational skill level post-training in VET, including over two thirds of those in low paid occupations and 86% of those in higher paid occupations (Pocock 2009).

It is difficult to sustain arguments for differentiated curriculum in VET and higher education when graduates compete for the same jobs. It is also difficult to argue that CBT results in efficiencies by training people for specific workplace tasks or roles when most people will not be employed in those jobs. And, it is difficult to sustain an argument that VET qualifications directly increase access to higher skilled occupations if this is measured by transition from a lower to a higher skill level. Yet these are the narrow purposes of VET qualifications as defined in policy, and these are how they should be measured.

Outcomes VET graduates from 2003 – 2009 show that the percentage in employment after training peaked in 2007 but otherwise was not much different; and, the percentage in further study after training declined by almost 8%. Demand for tertiary education declines with strong labour markets, but strong labour markets also in part account for the increase in employment outcomes. Some groups experienced little or no growth in employment during this period, particularly young people aged between 15 – 19 years. Their employment outcomes declined from 2001 – 2008 by almost 3% and their further study outcomes declined by 5%. Equity groups are over-represented in low level VET qualifications and languish in certificates I and II which have appalling employment and further study outcomes.

The new definition of CBT does not address the fundamental problem, which is that learning outcomes are still based on workplace tasks and roles. This means that units of competency are based on a disaggregated view of the workplace, so that ‘becoming competent’ consists of aggregations of workplace tasks and roles that have been defined independently of each other. Moreover, it is still a requirement that knowledge “should only be included if it refers to knowledge actually applied at work” (DEEWR 2009).

So, rather than providing students with access to the applied disciplinary knowledge that underpins occupational practice (as in the professions), they are only provided with contextually specific applications of knowledge. This is because knowledge is delocated from the applied disciplines and tied to specific workplace requirements. Students may be able to associate a contextually specific application of knowledge with a specific context, but it does not help them if they need to select a different application of knowledge, understand why they need to do this and not that, and creatively apply knowledge in new contexts.

Students must be able to choose and they can only do this if they have access to the applied disciplines. Unless they have this access, knowledge is not under their control. CBT ties knowledge to work as it currently is, and does not build capacity for the future. It also denies students access to the knowledge they need to study at a higher level in their field, and thus undermines the link between occupational and educational progression. Students also need access to theoretical knowledge so they can participate
in debates and controversies in their occupational field of practice. They need to be able to develop critical perspectives if they are to contribute to innovation.

VET qualifications need to prepare people for a wider range of workplace destinations and occupations, rather than a specific focus on workplace tasks and roles. Society, communities, workplaces and individuals benefit when high proportions of the population have non-school qualifications and higher level qualifications, and we need to recognise that qualifications serve more than one purpose. Young people in particular need access to qualifications that will support them in their transition to adulthood as active, contributing members of society. However, this would require a wider view of education and access to an enriched curriculum that supports students to situate themselves in their occupation and to equip them with the capacities they need to participate as active citizens.

References:


