

Supplementary Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Present and Future Skill Needs

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Date 11 July 2003

Summary: Since further reading of the Inquiry submissions, and thought about issues raised in my appearance before the committee in Sydney but dealt with relatively briefly, I have come to the following conclusions:

1 There is a need for a National VET Centre that engages in needs analysis research. At present the gathering of evidence about competencies (occupational skill elements) and competency standards is allotted to ITABs but there are problems in how these work at present and the fact that they really do not represent the small and medium operators who make up some 60-70% of employment.

2 Feedback filtering to me from a number of sources indicates that what business and industry is trying to tell ANTA is not being correctly understood or reported on the websites from the travelling road-show. There is a substantial divide between the reality of what is occurring at the training workforce and the interpretations of this at the policy/decision-making level. These appear to be two totally different worlds and the ANTA one is certainly not congruent with the realities of workplace learning.

A National VET Needs Analysis Centre

There are essentially two distinct functions involved in developing an effective training program regardless of the particular specialization. The first is the conducting of needs analysis research using various methods to determine what is required in a particular occupational area and specific skill elements. There is little disagreement in the VET educational community that the source of this data is business and industry and what is actually being practised in the workplace. The needs are related fundamentally to changed technology and workplace practices. These needs change inevitably as both technology and workplace practices change over time as had been noted in some of the other submissions (eg Australian Industry Group submission 74). Hence in any changing society needs analysis research is a perpetual, ongoing activity if sustainable competitive advantage is a policy goal.

The ITABs now consist of such diverse conglomerations of specialist areas that it is not possible for them to provide the needs analysis required for many diverse programs. A number of submissions, including that of Erica Smith, submission 33 and

Proof Hansard, 6th May, 2003, and Master Builders submission 85, have indicated there are various problems with competing demands and interests that do not result in the best educational outcomes. There are also very significant problems for specialised, dispersed, small professional groups, like cast metals, in gaining adequate representation of their concerns at ITAB level given the aggregations of specialisations in these. There is also the major problem that small and medium businesses, that comprise 60-70% of employment, are not well represented in the ITAB decision making process because the small-medium businesses are too busy earning to survive to be concerned about active representation of their interests in training.

It would seem that a national needs analysis centre whose brief was the continuous conducting of needs analysis research could contribute very substantially to the needs of both industry and VET educational organizations. Systematic, ongoing research into business and industry is needed to chart the changes but also to serve as a basis for developments of new areas across conventional professional trades areas with this being long recognised as necessary for innovative training development (Australian Industry Group submission 74). Such an organization could conduct research that took into account large, medium and small businesses and their needs in both metropolitan and regional areas through proper sampling procedures. Data gathered presumably could form the basis for national standards that are seen as highly desirable in several of the submissions. It is also possible that this needs analysis research could be coupled to workforce planning to prevent the cyclical skill shortages. The need for this specific national planning function has been indicated by a number of industry submissions. The needs analysis data collected would form the basis for educational programs but that is another quite distinct step in the educational process, albeit one that has been ignored as a federal VET policy issue for a long time.

The development of educational programs requires translating the desired, end product, needs analysis data into teaching/training-learning programs. Such programs involve formative teaching and assessment leading to the summative assessment of the desired outcomes (ie final certification or licensing), with the competency outcomes constituting the objectives to be attained. This involves conventional VET curriculum that has been effectively killed-off by training packages and related government policies at both state and federal levels. In essence training packages largely consist of desired outcome statements and offer no real advice on how to achieve the desired ends through learning with this being the really difficult part. Exceptions are in non-endorsed elements in a few training packages that have good teaching suggestions and support materials. There are also training packages that I am personally aware of, in IT for example, that are almost meaningless shells as they consist of elements unrelated to real industry practices. Although these packages have been registered, they do not contain accurate needs analysis data and so cannot be translated into effective teaching curricula.

Needs analysis and curriculum development are two distinct processes that are interdependent in ensuring effective learning and achievement of desired outcomes to the required standards. Conventional curricula allow the standardisation of teaching content tailored to specific qualification levels, and to a degree methods, and frees the teacher up to concentrate more upon effective teaching and catering for individual learning needs to achieve the desired outcomes via the means outlined in the

curriculum documents. If a more non-minimalist, detailed curriculum is provided there can also be substantial guidance in terms of teaching methods/strategies and resources to assist the busy teacher/trainer. The use of training packages has meant that unless there is an extant, developed curriculum (and some TAFE systems have done this) then every individual teacher/trainer must design a program. Where no curriculum has been developed then many trainers with minimal qualifications and little knowledge and skill in curriculum design each re-invent the wheel. The fact that there are many different programs created to attain the desired outcomes is one important reason for there being variable standards. Proper curriculum provides very substantial guidance to teachers but also offers flexibility for more experienced teachers to experiment with other approaches to achieve the identified, desired objectives.

What may well have been a source of confusion in official VET policy is that there is another step beyond agreed, standardised curriculum. This is the translation of curriculum a step further into meeting the needs of individuals and different class groups, ie very specific customised learning tailoring. In existing VET policy it seems as if this last step has been joined to performance outcomes without recognising the important intervening stage and processes developed by experienced, subject expert teachers in creating a curriculum to guide the majority of their less experienced/expert colleagues.

What is also highly desirable would be the creation of standard qualifications and training programs (curriculum) from the needs analyses results. Where regional interests differ from the mainstream industry demands, there could be core elements, that would be considered essential for work across Australia, and also elective elements to cater for the specialised, regional needs. Agreement of the states would be required for standardised courses/programs and it may be difficult in political terms to attain this. The states would generally wish to retain control as they have evidence of what has occurred with the university system under federal government control. However, certainly at present what is needed is the establishment of national standards on base contact hours at the various certificate, diploma, etc. levels that are not driven by minimal standards. Money must be provided to bring all state TAFE systems up to the required standards rather than settling for the lowest common denominator as was done with competency standards across the states for national awards.

I believe that a national curriculum centre, as opposed to a national needs analysis centre, would not be practical at present although this may be a highly desirable long-term goal. Not only would the states be unwilling generally to relinquish control, but serious, committed VET teachers and vocational experts would be highly suspicious of a national curriculum centre at present, as desirable as one would be. In short a national VET curriculum centre would lack credibility at present. This is because VET teachers, etc. have seen effective teaching disregarded in VET policy, and have had to deal with the myriad, hugely difficult teaching/learning problems created by the training packages and competency outcome statements without a curriculum backing. It may well be that the data from the national needs analysis centre should be made available to the states through their TAFE authorities to create curriculum with most training being provided by the TAFE system. The needs analysis data also could be available to private RTOs that would then also turn this into teaching

curricula/programs for their own private financial return. Existing or future training packages could be prepared by the national needs analysis centre with consultation through existing trades-business associations and the remnants of the ITABs (if these still exist). This could function effectively because the existing training packages really only consist of learning outcomes rather than curriculum.

Two Worlds

One of, if not the main avenue, for VET policy development is ANTA. It appears that ANTA is really not hearing and reporting accurately what many in business and industry are saying in the current information gathering process. What is being said is that their core concerns are business rather than education. The failure of business and industry to be more fully involved in training is indicative of this even though VET policies privilege business and industry above all other stakeholders.

I believe that it is time to take a step back with policy and to recognise that business has an important role to play, but that other groups also have different but equally important roles also. Business and industry are vital in terms of needs analysis as a basis for VET training programs. VET training is there to satisfy their needs but also the needs of the whole society. Business and industry also have a vital role in terms of work experience and skill practice in real work settings. On the other hand they are not the experts when it comes to program design and teaching to produce superior skill outcomes. Only teachers have the expertise in these areas, and the ability to act as gate-keepers in the process of skill quality development, regulation and control. It is time that VET policy more clearly recognised this interdependence and the expertise of the different parties in different areas.

From where I stand, the policy world expressed by ANTA and the coalface of learning, where 80% of training is occurring, are two totally different worlds. The reasons appear to be selective hearing and interpretation in terms of what is perceived as needed in the socio-cultural and political process. Although Senator Tierney challenged my raising of the issue of politicisation of the public service when I appeared before the committee in Sydney, at the time of writing this supplementary submission these issues are now emerging more systematically across a range of areas other than in VET. Unfortunately my analyses lead me to see this issue as fundamentally related to the positions that ANTA is taking, with these positions not congruent with the world where real skill learning is occurring. Indeed a great deal of VET policy is decidedly at odds with the evidence of various kinds, including solid empirical research as well as a great deal of anecdotal and descriptive research. Without a willingness to approach the truth and reality without ideological blinkers, and a substantial re-conceptualisation of VET policy, the existing skill shortages so well documented in many submissions will continue and get worse. It is probable in fact the results of previous policies have not yet been fully played out and even new policies, in the unlikely chance of them being formulated and implemented immediately, will be unable to quickly rectify the problems occasioned by previous policies.