

ACPET response

Training Product Reform: Issues for Discussion

December 2017

Introduction

ACPET welcomes the opportunity to provide advice on proposed enhancements to training products to ensure they support skills development into the future. Training packages are a fundamental element of the VET sector - it is important they are fit-for-purpose, particularly in an environment of digital disruption and changing workforce demographics.

Overwhelmingly, students and employers are very satisfied with the training being delivered across Australia. NCVET has reported consistently high levels of satisfaction over many years. Given the great bulk of training is delivered through training packages it would seem they are mostly meeting the needs of students and industry.

This does not mean there shouldn't be efforts to drive improvements. Feedback from ACPET members highlights the need to improve training package development and review processes and timeframes. That providers, who must implement training packages that respond to industry needs, are largely excluded from their development is a key issue to be addressed.

While acknowledging the potential impact of future work skills, it is not clear there needs to be a new category of skills with a raft of units 'imposed' across all training packages and qualifications. A 'one size fits all' approach that risks adding further complexity and timeframes to the training package processes, is not supported. Rather, the framework for the development and review of training packages should provide strong guidance on assessing future work skill needs and balancing them against present skill needs.

The same approach should be adopted to considering the need for greater underpinning theoretical knowledge in units of competency.

One of the strengths of training packages is the flexibility to develop qualifications that respond to the diverse needs of student and industry across Australia. While efforts to consider the sharing of similar units of competency should be more vigorously pursued, the development of broader, more generic qualifications raises some significant cultural and funding challenges along with questions of workplace relevance that need further consideration.

To respond to the dynamic needs of workplaces, particularly as the pace of digital and technological change accelerates, there needs to be greater recognition of, and support for, skill sets in training packages. At a time when there is a need to support lifelong learning and make it more affordable and accessible, proposals to limit access to skill sets are difficult to rationalise.

While training packages are the main vehicle through which training is delivered, the option of accredited courses needs to be preserved to respond to niche and emerging skill needs. As the needs of students and industry more rapidly change there needs to be more avenues to respond – not less.

The case for change

It is clear the impact of digital technology will be significant across many industries and occupations. Combined with an ageing workforce that are not 'digital natives' greater consideration of digital skills is warranted. At the same time there are still significant LLN deficiencies in the workforce that need to be addressed.

But the impact and timing of the impact of technology and other factors will vary enormously across industries and occupations. What is required is the capacity to understand these changes and effect the necessary adjustments, including necessary new competencies.

While the recognition and consideration of future work skills is appropriate, it is not clear from the discussion paper what they are, apart from the references to emotional intelligence, self-awareness and perseverance. Indeed, it seems from the paper that further work will be required to scope out these future work skills and develop the necessary units of competency, if that is the approach to be adopted.

Care needs to be taken that the proposed future work skills category doesn't simply add to the existing lengthy timeframes and complexity of training product development. There needs to be a framework that includes the consideration of the scale and timing of these future work skills impacts, in a way not dissimilar to that used to assess technical and foundation skill requirements.

A more necessary reform is the need to reduce the number of training packages and competencies and the timeframes for their development and review.

Any significant changes to the fundamental structure of qualifications should also be considered as part of the review of the AQF as a demonstrated requirement for a new skills category would surely need to be assessed across all qualification levels.

Qualification Design

The need to consider the inclusion of future work skills (once clarified) in the development of training packages is acknowledged. The extent to which these are included will vary according to the industry and qualification.

Accordingly, it would be preferable to not mandate a particular approach. The priority is ensuring the need for these skills have been assessed and an approach that best meets the needs of learners and industry is adopted.

Noting the concerns about not adding to the complexity of training products, and the lack of clarity around them (and what seems to be some overlap) it would be preferable to consider changes to existing, relevant foundation skills units.

A similar approach should be adopted to the proposal to have a greater focus on underpinning knowledge and theory in technical units. The framework that guides training package development needs to ensure there is a robust assessment of the likely impact of changes in the relevant industry and occupation and the capacity/need for the technical skills to be transferred to other (new) environments.

The assessment strategy will depend on the mix of theory and practical demonstration of competence required. While there have been some calls for external assessment of competency, the costs and practical implications need to be considered.

A concern with approaches that offer some 'future proofing' through more generic competency units is that qualifications may not be relevant to immediate workplace requirements. Most students want training that helps get them a job now - not in the future.

The current structure of government funding also does not readily support a model that enables graduates to top-up skills later. The Business Council of Australia proposal for Lifelong Skills Accounts recognises this shortcoming. This reality would likely see the need to add the specific skills into more generic qualifications with cost and time impacts.

Opportunities to share 'common' units of competency across related training packages should be a stronger part of the training package development and review process. The challenge will be from stakeholders that see their industry as 'different', necessitating unique units of competency. There needs to be a rigorous process to ensure these claims of difference are properly tested and not just an approach of 'encouraging' training product developers to consider similar units.

One of the strengths of training packages is that they provide flexibility to meet the diverse needs of students, job seekers and industry. Training providers, working with their industry stakeholders, can shape the qualifications to best meet local, regional or other priorities. Any proposal to mandate the number or proportion of core and elective units should be avoided. The case for greater consistency or uniformity in qualifications is not clear.

It is also unclear from the discussion paper that new ways of clustering training packages to meet regional, national priority or other exotic need/cause is warranted. This will simply add to the complex training package landscape.

Greater industry and RTO engagement in the development of training packages should help in not only ensuring the right mix of competencies but also in how best to convey or 'translate' to students and business the outcomes of particular qualifications.

Skill Sets

The greater use and recognition of skill sets is strongly supported. With more diverse learner demographics and the need for stronger lifelong learning pathways, training packages must increasingly recognise the legitimacy of skill sets and provide for their stronger integration with qualifications.

While it is a matter also for the review of the AQF, greater formal recognition of these 'micro-credentials' is warranted.

Given skill sets respond to particular industry needs and opportunities, they should not be encumbered with requirements for the completion of a previous qualification or foundation or future work skills. This will simply add to the cost and limit access by those who need this training the most. It will simply promote greater use of non-accredited training.

Accredited Courses

ACPET strongly supports the retention of accredited courses. As the discussion paper indicates, they are designed to be flexible and responsive to niche or emerging skill needs. They perform a valuable role in the training system. In an environment of rapid change in the needs of industry and their workforce and the lengthy training package development and review processes, the role of accredited courses becomes more relevant.

It is not considered there would be benefit in seeking to further constrain their development or approval processes.