

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE KEY COMPETENCIES:

A study of education policy making with specific reference to vocational
education and training in Australia

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Abstract

This study of education policy making opens a fascinating window into the contested terrain of education at the end of the 20th century, one that sheds light on the challenges that society faces in determining the purposes and responsibilities presumed of education for the future. The thesis analyses the policy trajectory of generic skills within Australian VET, and considers a range of policy contexts at the micro, meso and macro levels in order to consider the implications for our understanding of policy making. It involves a critical assessment of the development, trailing and implementation of the Key Competencies and an analysis of the emerging Employability Skills framework.

The research shows that the Key Competencies emerged as a result of various key policy drivers at the end of the 1980's, forces that continued to exert influence to varying degrees across the policy trajectory of generic skills and Australian VET from 1986-2005. Whilst industrial indifference, educational federalism and conceptual uncertainties came close to scuttling the initiative, key policy actors and supplementary funding ensured that the Key Competencies featured in one of the country's largest ever educational trials. Despite this platform, the Key Competencies were a policy initiative that came to be overlooked and bypassed, relegated to a second order priority by more pressing policy concerns and the inherent conceptual and operational difficulties they posed as a reform initiative. Whilst the emergence of Employability Skills has reinvigorated interest in generic skills, their progress to date illustrates that generic skills no longer hold the promise of being a vehicle for cross-sectoral articulation, nor the passport for entrée into high performance workplaces.

This study has illustrated how educational federalism, policy actors and policy institutions play a major role in shaping the policy process, and has suggested a new force-field model of policy making in vocational education that warrants further examination.

Introduction

The story of the Key Competencies is a complex tale, one that does more than trace the fortunes of a few individuals or tell a story of policy reform.

The Key Competencies open a fascinating window into the contested terrain of education at the end of the 20th century, one that sheds light on the challenges that society faces in determining the purposes and responsibilities presumed of education for the future.

My association with Key Competencies arose from the time when I was employed by the New South Wales State training agency as a project manager responsible for the industry training component of its Key Competencies program. From that point, I became interested in how generic skills policies and practices evolved in Australia's vocational education and training system, and it was that interest that led me to undertake this research.

This thesis therefore, is a case study of the introduction of generic skills to Australian VET, one that provides an opportunity to analyse the Key Competencies policy process and consider the place of generic skills in contemporary education systems.

In doing so, the research not only weaves a fascinating tale of Australian VET policy, but goes so far as to propose a new model of VET policy in federal systems.

The Economic Foundations of Generic Skills Policy

Consistent with similar policy initiatives in other Western nations, generic skills arose in Australia at a time when changing labour markets and new industrial conditions emerged at the end of the 1970s.

'In the mid-1970s, after 30 years of rapid growth and unprecedented prosperity for the major Western economies, the prospects for continued economic growth became much less favourable. The main cause was the remarkable increase in the price of oil in 1973 and again in 1979, a fuel on which Western economies had become heavily dependent. This produced a strong burst of inflation and gave rise to an unprecedented balance of payments problem and world recession' (Cook 2004, F5).

These conditions generated new industrial imperatives as the world adapted to new industrial conditions. These new imperatives included 'increasing globalisation of national economies, rapidly changing markets, increased global competition for goods and labour, new technological innovations and the movement from mass production to flexible specialisation in the productive process' (Castells 1993: 15-18).

These significant industrial shifts led to a fundamental reappraisal of national education systems and their role in society.¹ The emergence of higher levels of structural unemployment among young people gave added urgency to the reconsideration of training and education in the post-compulsory years of schooling, and existing systems of general education were reviewed to see whether they made an adequate contribution to national goals in a rapidly changing work environment (Rowland and Young 1996).

This reappraisal occurred in many Western countries including Australia.

'Australian moves to examine the workplace relevance of school learning took place against the backdrop of a worldwide movement in the same direction, at least in most OECD countries. During the 1980s, profound changes in the economic circumstances of most industrialised societies,

¹ The international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for example, generated a number of influential reports during this period including *Education and Working Life in Modern Society* (OECD 1975), *Becoming Adult in a Changing Society* (OECD 1985), *Education and Economy in a Changing Society* (OECD 1989) and *Linkages in Vocational-Technical Education and Training* (OECD 1991). These reports emphasised the changing role of education in the emerging social and economic systems of the time.

including accelerated technological change and an accompanying shift in policy sentiment, led to a universal focus on the potential contribution of education to national well-being and in particular, economic well-being.’ (Rowland and Young 1996: 11).

The development of the Key Competencies in Australia was one outcome of the wide-ranging reforms that Australia’s economy and systems of government experienced from the late 1980s. Amongst other goals, the reforms sought to include education within a broad micro-economic framework that reoriented education policy towards its role and significance in national economic development. This approach significantly challenged the traditional role of education, and established clearer distinctions between vocational and general education. These distinctions ensured that much of education’s role was realigned from a liberal democratic value oriented purpose, to one that saw education viewed by government and industry as a policy solution to a wide range of social and economic challenges.

This new vocationalist discourse came to dominate the way in which education was viewed, and demonstrated how the discourse of training came to increasingly colonise education at the post compulsory level (Dudely and Vidovich 1995).

Under the title ‘Putting General Education to Work’, the report of the Mayer Committee identified the impetus for its recommendations as being the pressure on Australian workplaces to ‘improve productivity and compete with world’s best practice in international markets’ (Mayer 1992: *viii*). These pressures were seen to create the need for new skills amongst workers, skills that required improved creativity, initiative and problem solving ability. The demand for these new skills evolved from dissatisfaction amongst employers over the ability of new employees to adapt to the workplace and make better use of new technical skills.

The Key Competencies then, were a clear demonstration of education’s emergent economic dimension, as they were conceived as a device to deliver

the skills and attributes required by industry and employers in the new industrial world order.

The Key Competencies

A specific focus on employment related generic skills within contemporary Australian vocational education and training (VET) can be traced in the first instance to the committee work of Karmel in the late 1980's and later Finn, Carmichael and Mayer committees in the early 1990's. These influential committees had a major role in shaping the development of Australia's VET system from that time, and led to the introduction of Australia's Key Competencies. They also signalled new approaches to the development of policy that involved unprecedented alliances between government, industry and unions.

Over a decade from 1990-2000, the Key Competencies were a controversial element of the training reform agenda, reaching their peak during a program of field trials or pilots during the period 1994 – 1997. These trials saw \$20M of pilot projects across Australia, involving work that sought to determine the most appropriate way for Key Competencies to be integrated within general and vocational education and training.

The Key Competencies Pilot Phase was one of the largest educational trialing exercises ever undertaken in Australia (Rowland and Young et al 1996).

Many project staff working within VET at the time envisaged that at the end of the pilot phase, Commonwealth, State and Territory governments would make substantive policy decisions as to how generic skills should be delivered, assessed and reported within schools, TAFEs and workplaces. Supporters within State and Commonwealth bureaucracies hoped that the Key Competencies would provide much needed structural unity between the three sectors of education, schools, TAFE and universities. Others saw in them a wide range of outcomes: as a means to introduce a system of national reporting

of school performance; to broadly improve the quality of teaching and learning; to develop enterprise and entrepreneurialism amongst students; to make school reports more meaningful and to facilitate entry into mainstream VET for those youth at risk in our community.

Whilst the Key Competencies created wide-ranging expectations, the Key Competencies agenda was not without detractors. Critics argued that the initiative represented the worst aspects of education policy, that it was based on ill-founded conceptual assumptions, and that it represented the beginning of the end for of a traditional broad-based liberal education.

Whilst the Key Competencies themselves came to mean different things to different people during their time in the policy limelight, the path of the Key Competencies policy initiative provides insights into the nature of policy making and the way that policy is constructed by the institutions, policy actors and policy system that is involved. The research also shows that the Key Competencies policy process provides new perspectives on policy making within a federal system.

Since their inception, the Key Competencies have been interpreted and reinterpreted through the various communities of practice within Australian VET.

Despite this, during the years since the trial projects were completed, there has been only limited evidence of change at a systemic level, with many of the original plans for the Key Competencies failing to be realised. There is however, evidence of some change amongst the States, with Tasmania and Queensland in particular adopting some aspects of the original concept. Overall however, there is a fragmented and diverse picture of implementation.

This research outlines this fragmented response and considers it in the light of ongoing calls for the development of Employability Skills, the new version of generic skills that replaced the Key Competencies in 2001.

Aims of the Research

Working on the Key Competency trials led me, like others, to see value within the Key Competencies proposal that was piloted during 1994 - 1997. School and VET sector professionals across the country were involved in varying ways through 75 pilot projects, and the research shows that they created a small cadre of committed activists who built on these experiences and continued to champion the Key Competencies in varying ways.

My own experience led to disillusionment about why the Key Competencies were abandoned once the trials were over. In effect, as suggested by a senior project manager for the Commonwealth government, 'there was a lot of good work and everyone got really excited, but then it ended and everyone went home' (APMA42). From 1997 onwards I became interested in why there appeared to be limited impact from the initiative, how \$20M of public money came to be spent without more explicit outcomes in both policy and practice. Having completed the research however, it is clear that there were substantive outcomes in policy and practice and that these outcomes might also provide new insights into how education policy operates within a federal system.

The initial aim of the research then was to answer the following broad questions:

- What were the outcomes of the Key Competencies initiative?
- What was the policy process that produced these outcomes? and
- What does the process and outcomes of the Key Competencies initiative tell us about current models of education policy?

Whilst these questions were refined as my thesis developed, they laid the foundation for a critical assessment of the development, trailing and implementation of the Key Competencies and an assessment of whether that policy process supports a new model for VET policy making in Australia.

Whilst characterised by Ministerial support at the outset, the trialing and implementation of the Key Competencies was also subject to the politics and challenges of Australia's federal system, where education remains the responsibility of the States despite the significant financial input of the Commonwealth.

Perhaps in recognition of their inherent value however, the Key Competencies have affected the teaching, learning and reporting of student achievement in both Australia's general and vocational education classrooms. Despite not being implemented to the extent of original intentions, the Key Competencies have also provided a solid base for the implementation of VET in schools more broadly, influenced the national goals for schooling, and provided some basis for the development of an Employability Skills agenda that continues to shape policy and practice today. In this way, the Key Competencies can be considered a necessary and important initiative that played a key role in broadening the goals of schooling and improving the pathways of students from school to the world of work.

The Research Approach

The research project was undertaken on a part time basis during 1999-2005 whilst I was employed in different roles in Australia's VET system.

The research involves a case study approach to VET policy making by using the Key Competencies as the 'case'.

It involved personal reflections on my experience of the Key Competencies project, and required the collection of information and data from a number of sources, including semi-structured interviews with policy actors, and the textual analysis of research reports, minutes, journal articles, discussion papers, submissions and policy papers.

Interviews of varying length were conducted with 60 different policy actors, with supplementary discussions and exchanges also conducted with various other individuals in the course of the research. These policy actors were, in one way or another, directly involved in the development, piloting and implementation of the Key Competencies, or the subsequent development of a broader Employability Skills agenda within Australia's VET system.

The policy actors involved included:

- school teachers, policy and program staff (independent, public, catholic);
- Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college teachers;
- TAFE policy and program staff;
- national and State representatives of industry organisations;
- policy and program staff within State and Commonwealth departments of education and training;
- policy and program staff within government agencies such as the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA);
- academics and university researchers;
- project contractors and consultants; and
- various other stakeholders.

By telling their story, these policy actors have provided a picture of why the Key Competencies have taken the policy trajectory they have.²

The teachers, bureaucrats, industry activists, consultants, academics and politicians interviewed during this research all had some involvement with the Key Competencies policy process. Some have passionately championed them in their work, becoming activists for their more explicit treatment and integration within mainstream programs. Others have dealt with them simply as another project within a large and increasingly complex VET system.

² The study of education policy development and implementation involves tensions between analytic frameworks that emphasise State control of policy (eg: Dale 1989) and those that emphasise micro-political agency (eg: Ball 1994). The term 'policy trajectory' (Maguire and Ball 1994) was developed to bridge the gap between these positions. It refers to the study of policy and practice at the macro, meso and micro levels.

However, the reliance on policy actors can be methodologically problematic. The direct involvement of policy actors can lead to a lack of perspective and reinterpretation in order to justify decisions made. These potential problems have been addressed however, by using transcripts of interviews and cross checking accounts with those from other actors. When combined with the other data sources referred to earlier, it provides for triangulation of evidence.

Clearly, the Key Competencies agenda encapsulates a number of significant themes that relate to quite distinct bodies of literature. The research thus draws on three identifiable literature streams, being:

- Generic Skills:
As they relate to learning, transfer and the development of expertise; how they relate to the skill needs of high performance workplaces, and literature on international developments in generic skills eg: SCANS, Key Qualifications, Core Skills etc;
- Policy and Policy Making
Incorporating literature on competing perspectives of policy and the policy process; literature on policy making and policy analysis; and literature on the relationship between research and policy; and
- Australian Educational Policy:
Incorporating literature on the local effects of federalism, economic rationalism and corporate managerialism; literature on the transition from school to work, new vocationalism and competency based training; and literature on the development of the Key Competencies in Australia.

These three literatures provide the basis from which the Key Competencies initiative was analysed and assessed from a policy perspective. This led me to examine the case of the Key Competencies with an emphasis on policy texts, contexts and consequences, drawing particularly on Ball (1990, 1993, 1994), Yeatman (1990, 1998) and Taylor et al (1997), who have all applied post-

structuralist perspectives to the policy process at the level of systems, organisations and individuals.

It is worth noting here that contemporary social research has entered a period of uncertainty as a result of the qualified claims surrounding the usefulness of traditional research perspectives. Consequently, three major research perspectives have shaped my research.

One is the critical tradition, drawing on the work of the social theorists known collectively as the Frankfurt School and more recently including the work of Habermas. The second is the interpretive method, which draws on a number of research traditions including social phenomenology and Weberian social theory. Thirdly, post-modernism and discourse analysis of contemporary education and training texts has been applied in this thesis. This, and other aspects of method are more fully addressed in Chapter 3.

Why Do This Study?

This study has been conducted because the research questions and their outcomes are considered significant.

I believe the research is significant because it analysed a major educational initiative in detail, provided new insights into contemporary Australian VET policy making and generated different perspectives to current understandings of the policy process. As a result, it has developed a detailed record of the complex processes involved in contemporary education policy making, a record which is often missing from the VET sector, and in doing so, suggests a new model for education policy making in a federal system.

The development, trialing and patchwork implementation of the Key Competencies has taken place amidst ongoing change to policy and practice within Australian VET. The rise of VET in schools, shifting political priorities and other aspects of reform are concurrent developments that are also analysed as

part of the Key Competencies policy process. This analysis provides additional insights into important policy outcomes and their links to wider international developments.

These outcomes are also considered significant because of the continuing focus by policy makers and other stakeholders on the transition from school to work and the associated challenge of developing skills that best prepare students for the world of work. As the research analyses generic skills policy, it also provides further insights into the potential and future of educational approaches that seek to support the new workplace and its demands on the future.

Important Definitions

A shared understanding of two key terms is central to this thesis. They are 'vocational education and training', often noted as the acronym VET, and 'generic skills'. Both are contested terms and can suggest a range of different practices and constructs. In order to provide some coherence to their use in this thesis, a working definition of each term follows.

VET

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the history of VET in Australia. In doing so, it illustrates the different roles of vocational education through the use of varying terms including technical education, technical and further education, TAFE, vocational training and vocational education and training. Whilst these terms are to some extent related to different periods of history, the notion that there was a discrete vocational education sector is a fairly recent development, one that seems likely to be further revised as a result of the ongoing growth of VET in schools and continued adjustments to the nature and scope of vocational education and training itself.

Contemporary VET incorporates schools, TAFE colleges, private providers, workplaces and universities as sites of delivery. Maglen (1996) defines contemporary VET as:

‘all educational and instructional experiences, be they formal or informal, pre-employment or employment related, off-the-job or on-the-job that are designed to directly enhance the skills, knowledge, competencies and capabilities of individuals, required in undertaking gainful employment, and irrespective of whether these experiences are designed and provided by schools, TAFE or higher education institutions, by private training providers or by employers in industry and commerce’ (1996: 3).

This definition defines well the purpose and scope of VET activity. It is also important to note because of the tensions that surround the delivery of VET in schools and universities, and because of the historical and socio cultural demarcations that have been created around these sectors in terms of policy and practice.

Generic Skills

The term generic skills is used in this research in order to overcome the ambiguous and disparate array of terms applied to employment related skills that are general in nature.

Chapter 1 of this thesis considers the practical and conceptual dimensions of generic skills within VET.³ It shows that the notion of generic skills itself is situated at the confluence of debates surrounding VET, skill formation and the labour market, being consistent with discourses surrounding neo liberal human capitalism. Generic skills have been conceptualised differently by different national and international organisations, variously known for example as:

- Key Competencies – Australia;

³ The development of a generic skills agenda in universities and other tertiary education providers is not included in this analysis.

- Essential Skills – New Zealand;
- Necessary Skills (ie: SCANS) – USA;
- Core Skills / Key Skills – United Kingdom;
- Transferable Competencies – France;
- Key Qualifications – Germany;
- Core Competencies – Netherlands;
- Transversal Competencies – Italy; and
- Key Competencies – OECD DeSeCo Project.

The definition of generic skills used in this thesis draws on a range of sources including Mayer (1992) and Kamarainen and Cheallaigh (2000). The definition is that:

generic skills apply to work generally rather than work in specific occupations or industries. They are the skills required to participate effectively in emerging forms of work and work organisation as they give people the capacity to manage themselves and undertake complex actions in personal and workplace contexts.

This definition includes both a public and private dimension, connecting both with the workplace and outside it. By omitting reference to the contentious issue of transferability, it also seeks to retain the potential for generic skills to improve teaching and learning when integrated in education and training programs.