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The Management of Curriculum Policy: Negotiating "Putting General Education to Work"

Presented by

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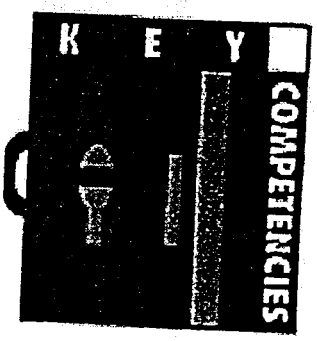
The Management of Curriculum Policy

Negotiating "putting general education to work"



Paper presented to the ACSA '97 conference
Negotiating the Curriculum: Whose Agenda?

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The University of Sydney

July 1997

INTRODUCTION

The paper provides an interim overview of work I am doing on national work in education deriving from the 1992 Mayer Report "Putting General Education To Work" and the promotion of 'key competencies' in education and as a link between education and work. The aim is to show how the convergence of general and vocational education, as a popular policy international across the globe, provided the opportunity for the development of an exemplar of how education policy can be managed so that the dysfunction between policy goals and practice (so well recognised in practice and the literature) need not occur (so extensively) as a destructive, deceptive and manipulative phenomenon.

The example I use is the Commonwealth's Key Competency Project [CKCP] which, I believe, demonstrated how **curricular reform - managed in a particular way - can be a collaborative partnership; that is, negotiated, iterative and practitioner-centered.** Collaborative partnerships of this nature, I want to suggest, provide a means of changing not only curriculum but also the structures and processes of curriculum decision-making at and across levels of education, training and work in Australia.

Work on the Mayer Key Competencies was initiated by the Commonwealth and conducted in collaboration with the States and Territories between 1993 and 1996 at a cost to the Commonwealth of $20 million. This paper is not a report on the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the 53 projects current at the time of writing nor does it aim to make comparisons between the projects managed by the States and Territories. This paper aims to explore the management of education policy, in this case the "Key Competencies" project, as an example of negotiating curriculum policy in the broad context of educational change.

It needs stating early that **what is being presented is an evaluation of something that has gone beyond the Finn and Mayer Reports both in a chronological as well as a developmental sense.** Firstly, the educational climate changed (as misconceptions and unfounded criticisms dissipated) from one that was initially hostile in the main to one cautiously receptive, even vigorously enthusiastic. Second, the practice of key competencies overseen by the CKCP has uncovered a set of relevant and timely factors that could well contribute significantly to the improvement of educational provision across sectors, providers and levels Australia-wide. The central factors include:

- The Mayer Report impelled a shift in educational thought about curriculum;
- The Key Competencies proved to be a valuable instrument of knowledge contingent to educational sectors and providers in Australia;
- Despite the differing spectacles of the CKCP projects nation-wide there remained an ability to function consistently and with assurance;
- The management by DEETYA of the CKCP enabled the lateral facilitation of achievement in each project and a localised proprietary;
- The policy footprint of the CKCP is such that there was a topographical relationship of sequent and shared learnings from pilots and projects informed through educational innovation nation-wide.

BACKGROUND TO "THE KEY COMPETENCIES

The impetus for the shift towards competencies began with three major reports. In 1991 the Australian Education Council established a committee to review the participation of young people in post-compulsory education and training [The Finn Review] which produced a report titled *Young People's Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Training*. One major thrust was for a national project to identify the employment-related learning which young people should gain in the post-compulsory years at school or training.

The first step recommended was a focus on six areas which the Committee called key areas of competence. In September 1991, the Mayer Committee was made responsible for further work on the key areas of competence. It produced two discussion papers followed by a final report in September 1992, *The Key Competencies, Putting General Education To Work*. The Mayer Report key competencies became:

- Collecting, analysing and organising information
- Planning and organising activities
- Using mathematical ideas and techniques
- Using technology
- Communicating ideas and information
- Working with others and in teams
- Solving problems
- Cultural Understanding

Key Competencies, as defined by Mayer, are those considered essential for effective participation in emerging patterns of work tasks and work organisation, *across* industries and *across* occupations. The definition of competence in the Mayer Report recognised that "performance is underpinned not only by skill but also by knowledge and understanding, and that competence involves both the ability to perform in a given context and the capacity to transfer knowledge and skills to new tasks and situations" (1992, p.4). It is clear that Mayer saw **competence as requiring 'heads on' and 'hands on' so that the competent performer grasps the principles behind the actions**. When this occurs, Mayer (1992, p.5) argued, transferability to new contexts is heightened. In the final report, three levels of performance were described for each competence. The Objectives of the CKCP were:

- To enhance educational outcomes for all young people;
- To promote the skills development necessary to enhance Australia's overall educational and economic competitiveness; and
- To support the convergence of general and vocational education.

This program of reform intended to insert competencies into industry training and higher education, as well as into secondary school curricula. With this plan came a shift in funding from the national government away from universities to technical education. **In 1993, all States and Territories accepted the proposal to trial Key Competencies in schools** to see to what extent they could be found in existing syllabus, whether they were appropriate to for new documents, how they could be applied within technical and industry training, and how professional development might proceed. Pilot projects and fieldtesting began in 1994 and concluded late in 1996.

There are comparisons to be made internationally with Core Skills (Great Britain), Employability Skills (Canada), Essential Skills (NZ) and Workplace Know-How (the USA). In addition, Vietnam has adopted Australia's Key Competencies almost to the word and China has begun an overhaul of their system with the familiar title 'putting education to work'. The Australian version of post-compulsory educational reform was able to capture the spirit of initiatives underway in secondary schools and to reinforce the development of partnerships between schools and Colleges of Technical and Further Education; even with the increasing number of private providers and sceptical, parsimonious and ill-informed sections of industry.

This development, as well as suiting the human capital needs of the state, had - I believe - **the potential to provide a mechanism through curriculum reform to release disenfranchised young people from inappropriate and irrelevant schooling** and to motivate them through holding out the prospect of routes of progression through a variety of learning settings (of equal status and access) with interchangeability of course elements across the tertiary education spectrum. I will return to this point later after a discussion of the management of curriculum policy.

Management as Collaborative Partnership

It is my view that the Commonwealth's CKCP was cutting edge work on curriculum matters through what turned out to be a collaborative partnership model of policy management. The CKCP deliberately held loose reins and thus was not like classical nor futuristic (see Eastmond, 1991) models of policy implementation design but suggestive of both. Anything less would have rendered well-nigh impossible the task of management as well as the tasks of the various pilot projects.

The central point to note was that the design of a program to trial Key Competencies required a management that had to authorise something it could not directly regulate. **The Key Competencies Program had to be tolerant of change** and allow projects to alloy themselves to the pilot-fieldtesting context. The development of a sophisticated design for the CKCP ensured greater efficiency and effectiveness as the majority of the participants took the program up as their own and committed themselves and their organisation to the program in way unlikely through a regimented top-down imposition model.

The Key Competencies Program found an answer to the formulation-implementation policy dilemma by **making practitioner collaboration contiguous, rather than absent or preparatory, to implementation**. Indeed, the CKCP pushed this even further **to make the implementation-as-research strategy act as a mode of policy production** or reproduction. This strategy ensured policy managers in Canberra and capital cities were informed and used that information to improve implementation work by, for example being aware of the degree of change that was being tolerated in the various project contexts.

Major research studies in a number of educational areas (tracking, ability grouping, class size) have shown how, according to Elmore (1995, p. 25) "Changes in structures are weakly related to changes in teaching practice, and therefore structural change does not necessarily lead to changes in teaching, learning, and student performance". For example, where smaller classes had been achieved in the USA, it was shown that teachers did not change their teaching method despite the advantages gained. Elmore (1995, p. 26) argues that this requires reform programs:

> to invest more heavily in developing the knowledge and skills of teachers (...) and it would require reformers to treat structural *change as a more contingent and uncertain result of change in practice*, rather than as a means of reaching a new practice. [emphasis mine]

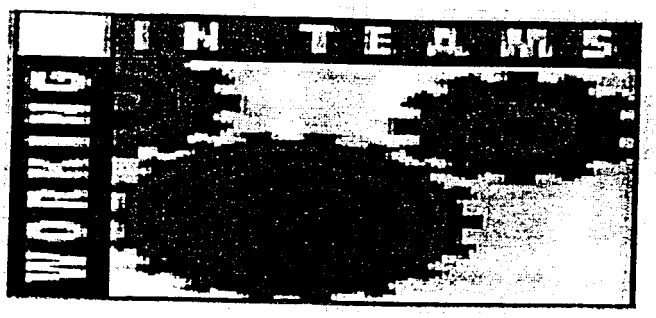
The CKCP has already provided an example of what, in the USA, is seen as belonging to the future. The construction of **a design that works through discovery-problem identification, to tentative implementation, to error elimination by participants, to policy adoption** (see Crump, 1993; Corson, 1996) - can be illustrated in the events of the CKCP. The design is incomplete and the process of creating specific modes of interaction within the various stages and levels needs to be part of the further developmental work.

Certainly, the CKCP has shown linear and cyclical models to be inadequate. What has been learnt is important knowledge for further development of the CKCP and for future work in curriculum development. While permitting contextualisation may have invited some weakening of the initial definition of the program, inevitable anyway in a longitudinal context, any weakening was minimised through a process of reflexivity through staged reporting. This approach allowed for a fixity of purpose linked through contrasting yet common projects.

The benefits of diversity in curriculum development far outweigh any loss of faithfulness to the initial program objectives. This is one lesson the National Statements and Profiles movement never understood. For example, the CKCP was highly effective in developing a series of networks across Australia that came to run independently of the central management in a way rarely seen in similar projects and that are likely to survive beyond the official completion. **In this way, what was being learnt from the program was inclusive, cumulative and iterative rather than repetitive and singular.**

The comprehensive cycle of question and answer undertaken throughout the program provided a supportive context for the development of work on the key competencies while requiring those engaged in the work - mostly practitioners - to not only ask themselves 'Are they a goer?' but, more importantly, 'If so, why and how?', 'Did the location make a difference?' and 'If not, are they still needed? Why and how?'. Finally, the managed flexibility of the CKCP allowed participation in the program of groups at first wary of the presumed intentions, expectations and educational directions to which they might become bound in a way that would conflict with the perceived purpose of their organisation [some independent schools, and some small businesses]. In the end, some of the best piloting took place in these sites.

By 1996 there was a buoyancy in the CKCP disproportionate to the relatively modest schedule of program objectives and undertakings mirrored by a candidness about the complexity of the task. **This scenario suggests how the work in the pilots went well beyond pragmatic proppings or the expediency attested to anecdotally for many similar initiatives (such as the NSP).** This feature of the program - commendable in itself - created a tension between the buoyancy of the pilots and fieldtesting that carried key competencies into, for example, the assessing and reporting phase against the strategy of putting these issues up as matter for enquiry in a way that counterpoised - quite sensibly - the various thrusts forward. It is to these phases that I now turn.



Curriculum and Syllabus

The Mayer Committee was a catalyst for one of the cardinal moments which have occurred in educational and public policy life in the post World War II era. The Mayer Committee was given the task of identifying the Key Competencies then describing them in a way "that will provide a common reference point for curriculum and teaching in both the school and training sectors and provide the basis for a consistent approach to assessing and reporting achievement" (1992, p. 1).

Most of the CKCP projects articulated closely with this objective but, in general, the emphasis moved from identification in curriculum, to identification of practice, to trialing in practice as a basis for developing a perspective of possible alternatives for assessment and reporting using key competencies. It was well-recognised by participants that **this was a strategic method to assist the growth of the projects rather than any endorsement of teaching, learning assessment and reporting as four separate partitioned entities.**

Curriculum mapping for school and VET documents was the start of many projects and was completed in most cases by early 1995. Mapping of syllabus and other curricular material was a complex, time-consuming exercise. The nature of education in Australia being what it is, there was little likelihood that the CKCP could have compelled a formalism on this stage as the outcome was predicated by the excessive number of state and territory documents that were mapped and their lack of national coherence, despite attempts to the contrary by the NSP.

Further, differences in types of senior school education across Australia - and the consequent differences in accreditation for completion of secondary education - meant that initial mapping and fieldtesting techniques for senior secondary education were unexaggerated in their demeanour. This may have been a wise course of action given the reception accorded the high profile National Statements and Profiles at this level of schooling.

For the vocational education and training [VET] sector, mapping was undertaken in a number of existing certificate courses such as hairdressing, accommodation services and manufacturing as well as in apprenticeship courses such as electrical fitter mechanic. Some key competencies were found in their entirety in all courses (for example, Using Mathematical Ideas and Techniques, Using Technology). Others were deemed to be partially present and, in NSW for example, Working With Others and In Teams was not explicitly mentioned in any curriculum. These findings were only partially stronger than for the school sector which was surprising to some observers working on the assumption that VET was a more natural home for (post-compulsory) key competencies.

One of the limitations in determining the findings from this mapping exercise was that perceptions of the presence and identification of key competencies was reportedly linked to what teachers do within their classes and/or regarded as important within the industry. Uncertainty within the VET sector during the period of the CKCP was to be expected given the zig-zag course most systems followed as a result of organisation and program reforms - sometimes unsympathetic to the key competencies objectives. One other limitation in VET was the high mobility of VET staff and the relatively high percentage of part-time staff which made building professional knowledge and developing practice an extremely whimsical proposition.

Assessment and Reporting

The task given the Mayer Committee - now perceived somewhat dubiously - assumed that competency-based assessment is the assessment of a person's competence against prescribed standards of performance. Those participants with a closer acquaintance with the key competencies than the "typical" pilot project participant were keen to see the projects proceed into this domain though this required an element of bricolage. As the CKCP progressed, various elements of Mayer's vision for commonalities in Australia's assessment and reporting milieu evaporated or failed to realise expectations [for example, the AVTS and AQF]. **Assessing and reporting key competencies remains the most difficult task facing future work on Key Competencies given the lack of isometric patterns across the nation.**

Most of the identification of the incorporation of key competencies into existing assessment and reporting mechanisms can be found in adaptations made to secondary and senior syllabus/curriculum documents of all states and territories and there are examples of work in

primary education (especially where the NSP have been adopted). This enforces a close relationship with subject content and subject specific assessment tasks with those key competencies that are seen as arising naturally out of the syllabus receiving attention as the focus for structuring units of work to make key competencies more explicit. While context and content are important, future work on key competencies will need to address the argument that key competencies need to stand alone in a way that contrasts with what currently exists - partly because they have a different philosophical basis. **It is here that assessment and reporting may make the difference between situated, proportional or abstract use of key competencies.**

Student interviews and student journals provide evidence that students valued monitoring their own work even in the limited extent allowed by current structures. Teacher judgment operated by using a variety of sources of evidence in determining assessment and constructing mechanism for reporting. Historically, much of this has been a professional secret with students, parents and employers perplexed by codes, questionable ranking and unsupported written statements. The incorporation of key competencies into existing practices has been largely conceptual rather than empirical. There has been a justifiable fear that whatever mechanisms are developed for assessing and reporting key competencies, if they become a national strategy they will be imperfect or, at best, as cumbersome and conflictual as the NSP expectations. The point is that assessing and reporting cannot be objectless yet this dilemma should not have a paralysing effect on gaining - and passing - this milestone.

Parents, through organisations like the APC and ACSSO, have shown a preference for assessment and reporting that is more accessible to them, more consistent across sectors and systems and understood nation-wide. The CKCP provided a catalyst for exploring such an assessment and reporting mechanism beginning with identification of how - and to what extent - they can be incorporated into existing mechanisms. Parents generally supported the move towards outcomes in education as a means of gauging an individual's learning continuum and assisting the teacher establish what is needed for a student's future learning. Parents, like other stakeholders, indicated concerns that outcomes could be interpreted narrowly and that over-assessing students and making comparisons to a statistical national "standard" were deleterious to learning as well as antithetical to the philosophy of an outcomes approach.

Employers and Higher Education have reacted with some muddle-mindedness to the incorporation of key competencies into existing assessment and reporting mechanisms. Employers are not one entity and small business is attuned to prospective employees having competencies whereas middle and big business is better placed (and better financed) to extend and "teach" key competencies to an employee when on-the-job. **There is a degree of employer scepticism about key competencies as 'just another bureaucratic bright idea' but evidence of support when and where they are convenient and preferred over traditional forms.**

Higher education is concerned that, if workplace competencies are effectively incorporated into assessment and reporting in schools, students will not have sufficient academic knowledge for university studies. Higher education may then claim a necessity to introduce entrance examinations. Both employers and higher education have missed the potential of key competencies identified in the CKCP to assist students/workers cope with a rapidly changing knowledge and skills base.

Teaching and Learning

The effectiveness of the program in incorporating key competencies into teaching and learning also began in many projects through mapping existing teaching and learning practice then exploring how this might be addressed in various models during the fieldtesting phase. This work was undertaken sedulously in all, and with some ingenuity in many, projects.

One of the positions adopted by many participants in the school and VET sectors fairly early in their involvement was that **key competencies can be valued at the level of teaching and learning without necessarily altering other factors such as assessment and reporting**. To some extent this is an unsophisticated position yet one not inimical to the goals of the early phases of most pilot projects. However, that key competencies are demonstrative of "better" teaching and learning practices was readily and publicly acknowledged by most participants in schools and VET. In many instances, the incorporation of key competencies into practitioners' teaching and learning practices harmonised with what many teachers and - deductively from the evidence - students felt to be fundamental to good teaching and desirable for contributing to learning events.

School teachers felt that key competencies assisted teaching and learning in subject areas as well as providing important preparation for work and/or study beyond school. VET teachers reported clear evidence that key competencies facilitated holistic (integrated) learning and assisted students to, for example, engage in complex problem-solving in simulated work settings. It needs to be recognised that this was not as easy to achieve in secondary schools where it was much more difficult to adjust procedures and practices in the short-term.

The essential ingredient of how effective the CKCP has been in incorporating key competencies into existing teaching and learning practices is found in the development of successful learning partnerships of a rare nature beforehand. Whereas teachers' considerations were focused on the delivery of curriculum at the classroom level (which means entertaining classroom management strategies and local policy matters), student considerations were finding value in the content and skills confronting them and deriving motivation from the connection of schoolwork to employment options.

Assessing and developing the potential of generic teaching processes was not a part of the original ballast of the Key Competency program. However, the piloting strategy adopted by the CKCP created an evolutionary process not unlike 'surfing' the internet in that some of the information stumbled upon was irrepressibly obvious in its applicability. One aspect of the CKCP that crystallised early in the trialing of student learning outcomes was that clearheadedness about teaching processes was necessary for the organisational framework for teaching and was impelled by the time limits of many projects. **Two areas where this was quite emphatic were carefully constructed situated learning events and developing assessment.**

While there is a clash between the notion of competencies as content-free and yet requiring a context to bring them out of the maelstrom of the learning experience, what resolved this paradox was that teaching processes controlled, rather than used, key competencies. The actor-preparedness for change of this degree was low across the projects and the location made a difference as did experience with site-based curriculum development.

Overall, key competencies gave a name to good teaching practice but - lacking strong backing from systems and sectors - this is not likely to counter examples of cramming key competencies into teaching processes in a way that generally distorts the context and the content away from the philosophical ideals that bind the key competencies into a progressive educational agenda. While many pilot project shifted the classroom emphasis away from learning that is reproductive, there was a difficulty linking teaching processes that encourage constructive and creative activity with progressive evaluation of "performance". Yet **in authentic learning experiences, it is the depth of conceptualisation that matters.**

I suggest that assessment and reporting needs to inform decisions about further teaching and learning, directions for continuing curriculum and professional development, improving the nexus between education and work, and determining the allocation of resources at local, regional, state and national levels. For key competencies, assessment and reporting needs to entail more than just determining whether a student/apprentice demonstrates a competency and/or meets prescribed standards, especially if done in a disaggregated manner.

On the bright side, one aspect of the CKCP that crystallised early in the trialing of student learning outcomes was that **changes could occur even in a short time-frame.** Key Competencies appear to have the ability to taxi on to each other in a way that connections are made not only between different competencies but also between school experience with competencies and expectations about work-related experiences students have about the future. Similarly, simulated work problem-solving activities in VET were perceived to be accordant with doing the key competencies and preparing to be competent in the workforce.

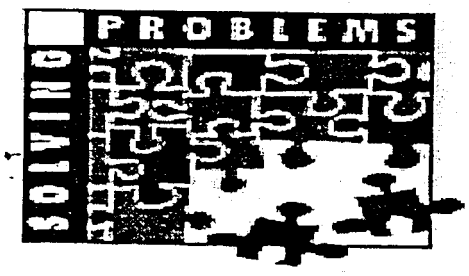
The result of this convergence between practice and possibilities was a sharp increase in motivation, especially in secondary school where this relationship has

traditionally been weak. None-the-less, the pilot projects (including those in VET) suggest that the effectiveness of key competencies is in **shifting educational processes towards learning to do in a way that links 'knowing' with 'doing' that values work without necessarily being more closely linked to vocational training.**

Key competencies have been effective as a catalyst for changing student learning outcomes through more active learning which integrates content-method-process-result. The shift of power relations in the classroom from 'power-over' to 'power-with' is on of the major gains reported by one pilot project which involved a range of techniques for reporting, reflection on achievement, self and peer assessment. **This shift in power to be inclusive of students led to significant increases in competence and confidence.**

Allied to this is a shift to greater variation in teaching input including greater student-centredness and increased practical relevance including variation in the degree of implicitness<-->explicitness. Other factors that demonstrated the potential of key competencies for improving student learning outcomes were a greater sense of direction and intention in their work. Utilising key competencies requires more than a individual conception of learning but **it is of primary importance that each person becomes an agent of change in their own learning.**

One uncertainty about improving student learning outcomes is that constant reference to key competencies can become tedious diminishing their relevance to the advantage of traditional subject matter. One solution to this bisection, in students' minds, of generic and content based competencies is for explicitness to be turned upon teaching processes. The trick is connecting students' thinking to what they already know and can do to what they expect to be able to do next - or in the future. This includes the teacher modeling good practice so that they are front-loading key competencies into learning outcomes through teaching processes. One point often lost in 'the competency debate' is **the extent to which improved student learning outcomes is dependent upon improved teacher input** (that is, it is often assumed that input is reduced whereas it is more a matter of changing the nature, emphasis and style of teacher input).



CONCLUSIONS

The Key Competencies Program can be said to have trialed a mode of education that values the freedom of actions. This view of knowledge has been presented without any contact with the CKCP by a contemporary American scholar:

> Education should free intelligence to recreate our physical and social environments, as well as ourselves. The education of creative imagination capable of envisioning future possibilities is every bit as important to intelligent deliberation as acquiring mastery of facts and principles of logic. (...) We begin by deliberating about actual environmental contingencies that shape us, next we must explore possible alternatives, then we must act to redesign the environment that conditions us. Garrison, 1996, p. 21. Emphasis in original)

The aim of education adumbrated here is one of that of more education, of growth through continuous education. Dewey argued this 80 years ago when he stated "Since growth is the characteristics of life, education is all one with growing (...) The aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education - the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth (Dewey, 1916/1980, p.58, p. 107) and Dewey saw this as only possible in a society of equitably distributed interests, that is, a genuinely democratic society. This is the meaning of "collaborative partnerships", for students, teachers, bureaucrats, parents and employers. New national initiatives, for example in literacy and numeracy as well as the McGaw recommendations for the NSW HSC, would do well to look and listen to what happened in the CKCP if they want to avoid the waste, mismanagement and trauma of most of what happens with curriculum in Australian schools.

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