Dumbing It Down

Where do Standards Fit?

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Abstract

In Australia, Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs are delivered in a variety of settings. You can be enrolled within a course in a high school, at a technical institution, private training provider or at your place of employment. Recognition of prior learning, on the job training and industry partnerships are strong factors supporting the change of delivery.
The curriculum content within these programs has also changed. For example within the Business Services programs, the prerequisite and corequisite skill of touch keyboarding to an Australian Standard has moved from a core requirement in the 1990's to an elective requirement in the 2000's.
Where a base skill becomes an elective skill, how does this effect the performance and outcomes for the learner, educator, employer and society as a whole? This paper will explore these issues and investigate the current position of standards within the VET curriculum today.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training, Touch Keyboarding, Touch Typing, Computer Literacy, Standards, Curriculum Development, Information and Communication Technology

Dumbing it down. That's the modern phrase we've heard a lot lately ……. We will most certainly find some company which has decided to make some great masterwork of theatre "accessible" by dumbing it down. (The British Theatre Guide, 2004).

In Australia, Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs are delivered in a variety of settings. You can be enrolled within a course in a high school, at a technical institution, private training provider or at your place of employment. This in turn allowed "greater access" to qualifications by training organisations, employers and students. This paper will explore whether "greater access" means "dumbing it down" with respect to standards within the national curricular in Business Services.

Background Research to the Paper

This paper stems from the research within a Master of Education by the author. The thesis titled *"From Rhetoric to Practice: Issues in Teaching and Learning Touch Keyboarding"* (Alderman, 2004) found that students and educators from primary to tertiary level education are required to use a computer keyboard to meet their course and employment requirements. It found that there have been significant changes to the vocational curricular in Australia with respect to touch keyboarding, teacher qualifications, dual accreditation and increasing access to vocational qualifications. The Certificate II in Business Services is the specific program investigated within this thesis.

The issues highlighted in this research project raised questions about the future direction and standards contained within vocational qualifications and this paper presents an opportunity to encourage discourse about these issues at an international forum.

Australian National Training Authority

In 1993, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) was established to nationalise the delivery of training qualifications and to incorporate competency based training and assessment (ANTA, 1993). This allowed students an opportunity to begin a course in one state and travel to any other state in Australia and be able to articulate directly into a course of the same level and requirements.

The advantages of the AQF (ANTA, 1993) are:
- Nationally recognised qualifications
- Establishing a national standard within frameworks
- Establishing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) which ensures students are recognised for previous life and employment experience and skills
- Mapping of qualifications from secondary, technical, tertiary and private training providers
- Development of National Training Packages

With the establishment of the Vocational Education Training and Assessor Board (VETAB) training organisations could register to become a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and have training courses recognised as part of the AQF. This broadened the types of organisations delivering National Training Packages.

RTO status allows an organisation to deliver nationally recognised qualification to their own employees and to provide specific or tailored training to suit their business needs or those of their

clients (training.com.au, 2004). The different types of RTO's are TAFE colleges and institutes, adult and community education providers, private providers, community organisations, schools, higher education institutions, commercial and enterprise training providers, industry bodies and other organisations meeting the registration requirements.

An important benefit in the national program is that an RTO can delivery their programs in more than one state or territory under the Mutual Recognition policy. The policy requires an RTO to recognise and accept a AQF qualification and partial

qualification of another RTO and recognise an individual's AQF qualification or partial qualification (training.com.au, 2004).

Qualifications According to Educational Sectors in New South Wales

The following table details the qualifications offered by the different sectors in New South Wales, Australia. Vocational Certificates offered in school are called Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools (ANTA, 2002).

Schools sector	Vocational education and training sector	Higher education sector
		Doctoral Degree
		Masters Degree
		Graduate Diploma
		Graduate Certificate
	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree
	Advanced Diploma	Advanced Diploma
	Certificate IV	
	Certificate III	
Certificate II	Certificate II	
Certificate I	Certificate I	
Senior		
Secondary		
Certificate of		
Education		

Source Qualifications According to Educational Sectors in New South Wales

As highlighted above students are able to gain vocational qualifications at school and those qualifications are recognised by the VET sector and other RTO's for articulation to higher qualifications and by industry for employment.

Business Services National Training Package in Practice

Within the *Certificate II in Business Administration* in Australia, learning how to *touch keyboard* was a core module within the national training package. With the nationalisation of training packages through the development of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in 1995, *touch keyboarding* became a standard national requirement.

The importance of *touch keyboarding* within the National Training Packages appears to be diminishing with dedicated modules in keyboarding changing from core to elective. The National Training Modules (1993) identify prerequisite and corequisite modules in *Keyboard Techniques and Operation* and *Keyboarding Speed and Accuracy.*

Technical institutions are the traditional deliverers of trade skills and *touch keyboarding*, since development of the skill in the early 20th Century, was a core component of the secretarial occupation. Change came in the form of a national review of the Business Services National Training Packages (NTP) in 1998 (ANTA, 2002).

A significant change is that an assessor/teacher is to be responsible for determining whether *touch keyboarding* is a necessary skill on an individual task basis. This brings into the mix a number of variable factors that can directly affect the national standard of student outcomes.

Dual Accreditation

Within the Schools Sector there is dual accreditation for qualifications to Certificate II level. The accrediting bodies are VETAB and New South Wales Board of Studies (NSW BOS). This in itself is problematic as the National Training Package is assessed competency based and the Higher School Certificate is standards referenced.

The NSW BOS require HSC students to complete two weeks (70 hours) of industry work placement as an additional component of their VET course. Industry is encouraged to accept HSC students for work placement in a one week block in Year 11 and Year 12. In the Hunter Region in 2003, 3,500 weeks of industry work placement were completed (Network for Educational Workplacement, 2004).

Touch Keyboarding as a Vocational Skill

As with any educational system there is a process of evolution within the curricula. The roll out of computers to primary and secondary schools, nationalisation of the Australian Training Framework, introduction of VET in Schools, diversification of training providers and the new legislation - Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) Act of 2000, are catalysts for change in the educational curricula in NSW.

The affects of these changes are only now beginning to emerge. Integration of ICT within primary and secondary, an ANTA review of the Business Services course in 1998, the articulation of VET in Schools and traineeship graduates to other institutions and the ramifications of OH&S Act - Risk and Hazard assessment for employers, educators and students, should increase the awareness and understanding of students and educators of the need for training in Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS).

With regard to the NSW Department of Education and Training, there is some evidence to support this awareness and there is concern that the level is still very low and with minimal reinforcement through assessment such as those introduced recently (Computer Skills Assessment Year 6 and 10, 2003) .

Early research (Alderman, 2004) found that expectations for computer keyboard usage is required for teachers and students from Kindergarten to PostGraduate studies. This is in direct contrast to the disappearance of touch keyboarding as a vocational skill. Given the above, *touch keyboarding* appears to be overlooked and undervalued in our employment and educational communities today.

Standard Measurement Withdrawn from National Training Packages

Any reference to measurement against an Australian Standard was removed from the National Training Package for Business Services in the 1998 revision. For decades the Australian Standard AS2708-2001 Touch Keyboarding Speed and Accuracy has been a valued teaching resource used in teaching the acquisition of touch keyboarding. It provides a valid and reliable way to measure skill and provide formative feedback on skill development with respect to speed and accuracy.

Current Discussion of Generic Skills

Generic skills are being discussed as desirable in the transition from education to industry or across industries. It is important to stop and clarify what is a Generic Skill? Stevens in Hayward and Fernandez (2004, 85), defined generic skills as:

The origin of this term is to be found in the economics rather than the educational literature, with generic skills being defined as general skills that have a productive value in many different firms. Literacy skills such as reading and writing, for example, have this generic quality. By contrast, specific skills such as knowing how to use a specific piece of machinery to produce a particular item in a firm's production process, are those which only have a productive value in a specific form.

When *touch keyboarding* is removed from the training, does this mean that *touch keyboarding* or using a computer keyboard in a highly efficient manner is a specialist skill and should not be considered a generic or transferable skill? When an assessor decides on a case by case basis whether *touch keyboarding* is a necessary skill and their own knowledge level of the skill can influence the outcome.

As Australia moves from an economy based on traditional industry to one based on knowledge and innovation, the skills and knowledge required by industry have changed from being purely technical skills to include broader, cross-industry and generic transferable skills.

The Vocational Education and Training Assessment Services identify generic and employability skills in VET as being a growing interest and are identified as areas for research (VETASSESS, 2003).

So given the interest in productive skills and the importance of developing cross-industry and generic transferable skills, why is a vocational skill of the 20th Century being phased out in the 21st Century?

What are the Affects of Introducing Variables to National Curricular?

Dual Accreditation

With dual accreditation, students enrolled in VET in Schools are responsible to two accreditation authorities, VETAB and NSW BOS. Each authority requires a different assessment method and one authority, NSW BOS requires an industry work placement. This increases the administrative work for teachers and the mixed assessment methods can cause confusion among students (competency based and standards referenced).

Comparison of Teacher Qualifications between TAFE and VET in Schools

A registered RTO who wish to delivery accredited training and assessment and issue qualification and statements under the AQF must be registered (training.com.au, 2004). There are set of Standards for Registered Training Organisations under the AQTF that requires an RTO to *"use trainers and assessors with specified competencies"*.

A significant change to the RTO delivery requirements in school delivery. There is an agreement by ANTA and NSW DET to modify the experience and qualifications of VET teachers in schools in comparison to VET teachers in technical institutions. This translates to a reduction in experience from three (3) years of current industry experience to two (2) weeks of current industry experience. A trade qualification one level higher than the one being delivered is now reduced in schools to that of the certificate being delivered (Catholic Education Office, 2004).

The qualification of the teacher at school is lower than that required of a TAFE teacher. Furthermore, the certificate of the teacher at school is required to be completed by the time the students complete the same certificate (VET Teacher Training, 2004). In practice this allows the teacher to be one step, or one module ahead of the students they are teaching. In comparison to the TAFE counterpart who has a higher qualification with years of industry experience, it appears that the national standard of outcomes may be compromised.

An Assessor with No Skills

A further change is that an assessor is responsible for determining whether *touch keyboarding* is a necessary skill on an individual basis. Another change is the skill of touch keyboarding. In 1987 the author was required to demonstrate a touch keyboarding skill of 50 wpm and accuracy of 98% or higher to meet the Australian Standard AS2708 and be deemed eligible to teach Business Services in NSW technical institutions. In 2002, a teacher applying for retraining in VET is required to have *"familiarity and understanding of keyboard functions"* (VET, 2002, 49).

This is in direct contradiction to the author's experience within the vocational field and in teacher education. In order to teach students how to touch type, McNicol (1968, 2) stated:

The teacher must understand the subject, both as expert and learner and have knowledge of and competence in, the skill of teaching.

McLean (1994, iii) further supports a qualified educator when he recommends:

Anyone who wishes to learn to type should do so preferably under the tuition of a qualified teacher and at least with the aid of a good typewriting instruction book.

Within Australian literature, this is fully supported by the Vinson Report (2002, 69). The report qualifies the *Standards of Professional Practice for Accomplished Teaching in Australian Classrooms* specifically:

- Exemplifying the qualities and values that they seek to inspire in their students, including authenticity, intellectual curiosity and rigour, tolerance, fairness, ethical behaviour, common sense, self-confidence, respect for self and others, empathy, compassion, appreciation of diversity and acknowledgement of cultural differences.

Within technical institutions the qualifications, skills and industry experience have remained fairly standard for the last 20 years. Currently in NSW Institutes of Technology a technical teacher (TAFE, 2003) is required to possess:

- A teacher qualification, minimum of a degree
- A qualification higher than that being taught
- 3 years current industry experience

A secondary high school teacher in NSW teaching within the VET in Schools program (NSW DET, 2003) is required to possess

- A teacher qualification, minimum of a degree
- A qualification equal or higher than that being taught
- 2 weeks current industry experience
- Certificate IV in Assessor and Training

In the author's experience the difference in industry experience is quite dramatic and would severely limit the ability of the teacher to give sound advice about the likely occupational benefits of successful completion of skills training.

Industry Isolation

One of the benefits of attending a technical institution is the opportunity to share experiences with other students and to gain experience on the latest equipment. The author in teaching Business Services at the Hunter Institute of Technology in the 1990's found that the "Model Office" allowed full-time, part-time and traineeship students equal opportunity to access the most current business equipment and through participation in discussion groups brought their own current industry practice to the wider group.

With traineeships located in industry and assessed by an outside RTO, it is of concern to the author that these students may be isolated from their peers and that their employment environment may be dated and there may be no opportunity for "Best Practice"

mentoring by peers or supervisors. In comparison to other students, their industry knowledge may be limited and therefore restrict the transferability of their skills and knowledge to other employers or industries.

The Difficulties in Delivering National Training Packages

After a decade, the stakeholders who monitor and administer national training packages have introduced certain variables that may compromise the student outcomes at the level of Certificate II in Business Services. The variables are:

- National Training Package in Business Services – demonstrating the skill of touch keyboarding is no longer a prerequisite, corequisite or a requirement
- All references to measuring the skill of touch keyboarding against an Australian Standard has been removed from the NTP Business Services framework
- A previously core vocational skill, touch keyboarding, is now determined by an assessor on a case by case basis
- Qualifications of teachers/assessors varies from vocational institution to school delivery
- Diversification to industry delivery - students in industry may be isolated from "Best Practice" opportunities
- Dual accreditation and work placement increases the workload for HSC students in comparison to all other students enrolled in the Certificate II level of qualification
- Different student outcomes may impact on the articulation of students with a Certificate II in Business Services when moving to a higher qualification

This paper is an opportunity to reflect on a decade of application and change within one national framework. It may be at a relatively low level of certificate, but as the base level is a vital component of the framework as a whole.

As identified above there is broader access for the students, industry and RTO's. With this diversification the author believes there are concerns that this reflects "dumbing it down" and the cost of access to a wider group is the lowering of standards and the increased opportunity for fluctuating student outcomes.

At a time when generic skills and transferability of skills is on our national agenda, why has a highly valued 20th Century vocational skill like *touch keyboarding*, disappeared from the national curricular.

Where to from Here?

Presentation of papers offers an opportunity for educators to ponder and discuss the issues raised, however, what happens next? The completion of the research project offers an opportunity to report back to the stakeholders with the findings of the research and for any unresolved findings that were considered outside the parameters of the thesis, there are further opportunities for ongoing research.

Later this year a new research project will commence titled "Touch Keyboarding: the potential for business". This project will investigate if learning to touch keyboard does affect the efficient usage of a computer keyboard through a common communication tool, Email.

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About the Author

A computer literacy teaching background in technical, community and tertiary education is strongly supported by a keen research interest in the current development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) within the educational sector. Current publications are texts for touch keyboarding skill development and embedding ICT in curriculum. Current employment involves curriculum development coordination of integrated problem based learning in a tertiary environment. Qualifications – Master of Education (thesis submitted), Bachelor of Adult Education, Teaching Certificates in Keyboarding and Word Processing, Certificate IV in Assessor and Training.