Abstract: Over the past few years, there has been considerable research activity into the need for and role of generic skills within vocational education and training. This activity reflects an increase in industry enterprise demand for the generic skills necessary for work organisation, contingency management, problem solving and working collaboratively. This paper reports on two ANTA initiatives aimed at identifying effective approaches to the inclusion, within vocational education and training, of a set of generic skills, identified by the Business Council of Australia, which have been given the collective title of Employability Skills. These initiatives are concerned with the development of models for the recognition and certification of the employability skills within Training Package programs as preparation for wider consultation with vocational education and training stakeholders.
Employability Skills: Revisiting the Key Competencies or a new way forward?

Catherine M. Down  
RMIT University

Over the past few years, there has been considerable research activity into the need for and role of generic skills within vocational education and training. This activity reflects an increase in industry enterprise demand for the generic skills necessary for work organisation, contingency management, problem solving and working collaboratively.

This paper reports on two ANTA initiatives aimed at identifying effective approaches to the inclusion, within vocational education and training, of a set of generic skills, identified by the Business Council of Australia, which have been given the collective title of Employability Skills. These initiatives are concerned with the development of models for the recognition and certification of the employability skills within Training Package programs as preparation for wider consultation with vocational education and training stakeholders.

The report from the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA), Employability Skills for the Future (2002) was commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority as a result of an increased interest in the development of generic skills within vocational education and training (VET). Its authors identified a number a personal attributes, generic skills and elements of these skills which were the building blocks of the Employability Skills Framework. In doing so, they acknowledged that:

- these skills build on the Key Competencies
- employer recognition and integration of the Key Competencies within work, learning and recognition were strong
- employers identified the importance of those personal attributes that contribute to employability
- the same critical mix of skills had been identified by small and medium enterprises and large enterprises
- the skills identified as critical were broadly consistent across industry sectors
- it was at the element level that the contextual and industry nature would become apparent
- the priority placed on the employability varied from enterprise to enterprise
- employability skills are as relevant as job specific or technical skills
- employability skills are relevant to both entry level and established employees
- there is strong recognition of the role of lifelong learning in skill development and response to change
- the skills identified in the framework underpin the capacity for leadership
- customer service is not an isolated skill but, rather, is the outcome of the integration of a range of different skills
- the employability skills are as important for effective participation in the community as they are in employment.
The ACCI/BCA report has received a mixed reception with the controversy centred on a number of key elements, namely, the term “employability skills”, the skills identified, the proposed recognition of attributes as well as skills and the perceived lack of consultation within the VET community. Nevertheless, ANTA has accepted most of the recommendations of the report and has since commissioned at least three projects aimed at the inclusion of employability skills within Training Packages in order to ensure their development and recognition. As the author has been involved in two of these projects, this paper looks at where this work is leading and what it means for VET practitioners.

The employability skills framework
The key skills identified in conjunction with the personal attributes to make up the Employability Skills Framework are:

- **communication** skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers;
- **team work** skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes;
- **problem-solving** skills that contribute to productive outcomes;
- **initiative and enterprise** skills that contribute to productive outcomes;
- **planning and organising** skills that contribute to productive outcomes;
- **self-management** skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth;
- **learning** skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes; and
- **technology** skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks.

This selection of skills is not very different from the Key Competencies, which were identified more than a decade ago by the Finn Report (1991) and reformulated and enhanced by the Mayer Report, *Putting Education to Work* (1992).

It is not this selection of employability skills which has caused most of the dissent but the inclusion of a list of personal attributes which contribute to overall employability and in which these skills listed above must be embedded. These attributes are:

- loyalty
- commitment
- honesty and integrity
- enthusiasm
- reliability
- personal presentation
- commonsense
- positive self-esteem
- sense of humour
- balanced attitude to work and home life
- ability to deal with pressure
- motivation
- adaptability.
**A rose by any other name would smell as sweet?**

By deciding to call the set of generic abilities they are championing “employability skills”, the ACCI and BCA seem to be repeating one of the mistakes which was made with the Key Competencies.

Key competencies are not competencies as understood within a competency based framework. They should perhaps have been called capabilities which might have reduced the ensuing confusion about levels as well as the on-going debates as to whether they should be embedded within other Units of Competence or taught and learned as a stand alone entity. By using the term capability, the sense by which these are the learning tools or glue, which enable the learning of other competencies and the embedding together of competencies into knowledge and performance, is clearly conveyed. In a similar sense, the employability skills are not skills in common parlance which often distinguishes between doing and knowing as in the use of the phrase “knowledge and skills” in the definition of competence (ANTA 1996?). The ACCI & BCA definition of a skill, namely:

Term used to describe the learned capacity of the individual. *Skills* has been used instead of *competencies* reflecting the language of the enterprises interviewed and to avoid any confusion with the different ways *competencies* is used

(ACCI & BCA 2002, p. 5)

does nothing to avoid confusion by using skill as an overarching term for learned capacity when it is commonly used to denote a performance. The continuing debate on the nature and role of underpinning knowledge within Units of Competence has its roots in the use of the term “skill” to describe a capacity for action, which consequently leaves in question the underpinning knowledge which may or may not be embedded within this action.

Of even more concern is the use of the term ‘employability’. Although the authors of *Employability Skills for the Future* noted that these ‘skills’ apply equally to those in work as to those seeking work, it is the latter group with which the word is commonly associated. Employability carries with it the connotations of entry level, pre-vocational, low AQF levels when these generic capabilities are, clearly, an essential part of our lifelong learning and development as social beings.

It has been suggested that these should, perhaps, have been termed “employment ……”. This is preferable in terms of conveying a lifelong development – but only for some. It excludes the voluntary workers, the self-employed, those who choose not to be employed, the unemployed and retirees. The capabilities they describe are as useful in our out of employment lives as they are at work. They are essential capabilities for work but they are also essential for our lives as a whole.

**Re-badging or innovation?**

The second issue of concern with the listing of the employability skills in *Employability Skills for the Future* is the actual ”skills” involved. The longer one looks at them, the more obvious it becomes that these are basically the Key Competencies re-badged. It is true that ‘using mathematical ideas and techniques has slipped off the agenda and that cultural understandings appears to be a non-starter. One wonders why. Is it the discomfit that many
people have around their experience of school mathematics, that leads to a failure to recognise that estimating, prioritising, counting, making spatial comparisons and many other mathematical skills which we use everyday in our work are in fact mathematical skills? Do cultural understandings need to stay in the too-hard basket in a world which stresses working with others, collaboration and partnerships? How can we work together without understanding the ‘way we do things around here’ and the factors which marginalise others in such an environment?

Initiative and enterprise and self management appear to be new to the list. Learning is an enhancement of the first of the Key Competencies defined by Putting Education to Work (Mayer 1992), whilst the other six can be viewed as a re-statement of the original Key Competencies. But are initiative and enterprise and self management really new?

When we look at the ANTA definitions of competency (ANTA 1998; 1997), we find that the competency includes:

- task skills;
- work organisation skills;
- contingency management skills; and
- work environment management skills.

Surely it is in our management of contingencies that we demonstrate our initiative and enterprise and is not self management an inclusive term for us being able to organise our work and operate effectively with the work environment?

As someone who has long argued that until our assessment of competency takes all these dimensions into account, we are taking a single dimensional view of competency and, as such, assessing the shadow and not the reality, I have concerns about this sleight of hand which moves essential dimensions of competency and renames them as employability skills. Of course they are essential for work – just as they are essential for existing in society. The worry is, by naming them as employability skills, do we run the risk of continuing to view competency as simply the ability to perform task skills under ideal conditions. Where then is the need for underpinning knowledge? My dogs can perform all sorts of obedience exercises – but even they choose or make judgements about when and where they will apply them!

It is to be hoped that the promised consultations with the wider VET community will provide the opportunity to re-negotiate the actual skills which make the final list.

The inclusion of personal attributes

The potential difficulties in systematically assessing one’s initiative and enterprise, within an environment where consistency is seen as a major concern and is often confused with sameness, pales into insignificance when we try to imagine how the ‘personal attributes which contribute to overall employability’ (ACCI & BCA 2002, p. 8) might be recognised without bias or cultural insensitivity.
When competency-based training (CBT) was first introduced in Australia, it was sometimes described as being comprised of knowledge, skills and attributes. The A word was rapidly discarded along with other A words such as attitudes and awareness (of context and its effect, role and functions) as being too hard to assess and far too hard on which to get agreement of. At the time, this disappointed me as I do not think we should avoid hard things if they add to our understanding and performance. I still believe that it is the three As which transform a capability into a competence. But given that more than ten years have passed since the introduction of CBT and that assessment is still skewed to a focus on task skills alone within many of our institutions and workplaces, there is a need for some serious research and work on how the recognition of attributes will need to be implemented and played out.

After all, the inclusion of attributes within American skill frameworks has resulted in a very slow adoption rate of the skills framework within industry (Kerka 1998) and most of the countries with similar vocational education and training approaches to our own, have to date avoided anything more than a superficial acknowledgement of the role attributes play in the exercise of competence. Should we respect their wisdom and experience or must we insist on our right to make the same mistakes for ourselves?

**Consultation Process**

My understanding is that ANTA intends to develop a number of support processes around the employability skills identified by the ACCI & BCA report and to then present this material to the State and Territory training Authorities for wider consultation. This would appear to be a sensible course of action and it is hoped that the resultant consultation will be as inclusive and consultative as possible.

There persists, however, a fear in some quarters that this may not be so. Underlying this fear (or cynicism) are unresolved issues around the respective roles of ANTA, industry and the vocational education and training community of practitioners. Although in the recent consultations by ANTA in the development of its strategic directions, there were some signs of a growing recognition that industry, government and VET providers needed to develop a tripartite relationship to avoid the issues arising from an industry-led VET system, there were also signs that any watering down of the primacy of industry in such arrangements would be resisted.

Theoretically, industry defines what, providers determine how this might be achieved and the role of the government is to provide the statutory, policy and fiscal environment in which this might happen. In reality, it is a contested environment and one in which the (perhaps unintentional) alienation of providers has resulted in much discomfort, disengagement and disillusion.

**Further progress**

In order to prepare for the consultation process, ANTA has commissioned a number of research and other projects in order to collate the necessary strategies and resources for the integration of the employability skills within the National Training Framework. At the same time, a number of other bodies, such as state training authorities, the Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) and the National Centre for Vocational
Education Research have sponsored investigative work into the employability skills. I have been involved in two of these projects.

The first of these was a project in conjunction with *ratio* – a Sydney based consulting group headed by Tess Julian. The objective of this short, intensive project was to:
1. develop options for incorporating the employability skills in Training Packages in a way that facilitates the recognition and certification of these skills.
2. test options with a small sample of Training Package developers and departmental staff in States and Territories responsible for Training Package implementation.
3. prepare a report for consideration by the NTQC.

In doing this, a set of eight possible models for the inclusion of the Employability Skills identified by the ACCI/BCA Report were developed. In a subsequent project, examples of how these models could be used across a number of Training Packages were developed through consultation with industry and VET practitioners. These examples were then used as the basis of focus groups with a cross-section of the wider VET community and elicited considerable support. They also demonstrated a need for the development of common understandings about the employability skills which have not yet been realised. The final parts of this paper uses material from the report by *ratio* & Down (2002, pp.

**Understanding employability skills**

Employability skills are those basic skills and capabilities required for getting, keeping and doing any job. They complement the technical skills required for a specific job. Our training and education system has traditionally conceptualised skills in a way which responds to a paradigm of work which is fast disappearing. We are now moving into the age of the high performance workplace in which all employees are expected to have the necessary skills to enhance the performance of the enterprise as a whole. For example, until recently the need for creative thinking among the general workforce would have been unimaginable, and yet now it is almost the highest on the list of sought after attributes.

Employability skills are usually not discrete functions of work, although at times can be. They operate within and between work functions, they underpin work and provide an integration of work. They are often not related to academic performance or technical performance and have more to do with emotional intelligence than traditional notions of intelligence. Employability skills are context specific and cannot be accurately assessed out of a specific application. For example, working in a team cannot be assessed outside of a team in meaningful work, problem solving at work can’t be assessed outside of a work problem.

The Employability Skills are not a package of skills, they operate in many different ways, for example:
1. **Employability skills can be an integral part of a specific technical competency**
   It is one thing to know how to set up lights for a function, but competency means having the capacity to improvise when equipment fails, to keep calm when the deadline is brought forward, to reassure a new team member - these aspects are employability skills.
2. **Employability skills operates across tasks as well as just within them**
The skills serve to link a number of work tasks. Skills such as working together, time management, multi tasking and the capacity to transfer across contexts are core skills about work rather than about one task. So expressing them within one competency standard ignores the fact that they are relevant to most. Expressing them in every competency standard devalues them. Expressing them as a separate competency standard removes the context.

3. **Employability skills are needed by individuals to mange their work life**
While there is debate about whether many of the attributes can be taught, they perhaps suggest that young people in particular need guidance in identifying the behaviours appropriate for a work environment. Currently, many believe that these are not defined sufficiently explicitly in our training programs. In addition, everyone needs the skills to be able to manage themselves at work and between jobs, to identify what they need to learn, and to access the learning that they need.

4. **Employability also includes new skills needed by organisations and individuals to survive the new global commercial landscape**
Increasingly employees need to enhance their cognitive and interpersonal skills. It is now as important to learn how to think as to what to think, to learn the skills for lifelong learning and adaptability, to learn to deal constructively with diverse colleagues, markets and products. It is also important to be able to contribute to an innovative work environment and to knowledge management.

The challenge for educators then, is how to capture, describe and deliver these skills in a way that makes sense. Our past efforts, the Key Competencies, went a long way in identifying them; they acknowledged that they are critical to all work. However, feedback suggests that they do not address the complexity of the way the employability skills operate and enhance work performance.

Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that Training Packages are still not well understood by many trainers and assessors. This means that much of what is possible in innovative delivery against Training Packages is not being realised and this further impedes the development of employability skills.

**Context of VET**
In discussing the recognition of the employability skills within Training Package development and implementation, it is essential that the current context of VET practitioners is taken into account. The *Strategic Evaluation of the Qualitative Impact of the Introduction of Training Packages on Vocational Education and Training Clients*, which was completed earlier this year, presented a snapshot of a context in which variability, uncertainty and confusion with respect to Training Packages was evident.

Whilst an increasing number of practitioners are gaining confidence in their new roles and embracing the flexibility and multiple delivery and assessment pathways, which Training Packages enable, to meet the diversity of student needs, others are still clinging to the practice and expectations of the past. In particular, the report highlighted:
• the variability in understanding the nature, function and roles of Training packages across VET practitioners and the subsequent diversity of effectiveness in implementing Training Packages

• infrastructural barriers to the introduction of Training Packages where systemic or institutional policy and procedures were not compatible with the flexible use of Training Packages

• the need for effective professional development to enable teachers and trainers to develop and use their educational competence to develop effective learning paths for different groups of students within the Training Package framework

• the need for a supportive environment which encourages innovation, manages risks and is, thus, tolerant of error and learning through innovation and experience

• the lack of sufficient educational leadership at all levels of the VET community who can model and assist practitioners in finding ways to effectively implement Training Packages and to envisage a better vocational and training future and seek to achieve it.

It is, therefore, important that the introduction of the concept of employability is not seen as yet another change made before previous changes have been given time to gain acceptance within the VET community. Equally important is to ensure that it is accompanied by appropriate and accessible professional development activities which will not only enable the implementation of a formal process for recognising employability skill development and for integrating the concept of employability skills within Training Package learning and assessment.

**Levels of Employability Skills**
Employability skills are developmental capabilities. This development is not bounded and is experientially based. This means that the development of employability skills is influenced by:

• experience in developing and using skills within a meaningful work task
• approaches to learning
• effective reflection on the outcome and process of work tasks
• interaction with and understanding of the context of the meaningful work task
• need to plan and organise work task
• performing the work task in non-routine or contingent situations.

This means that the standard at which employability skills will be demonstrated and recognised must be consistent with the standard of the other skills and learning in which the employability skills are embedded. In practice, this means that the employability skills will be recognised at the Australian Quality Framework level of the qualification being undertaken.

**Conclusion**
It is hoped that, following this preparatory work, a discussion paper will be prepared and be the subject of intensive consultation in order to ensure that VET practitioners can develop a sense of ownership of and commitment to the Employability Skills. This will only happen if the concerns of the VET community are listened to and a mutually agreed final position
is reached. For, unless this happens, there is a real danger that the Employability Skills will become as impotent after ten years as the Key Competencies have proved to be.

References


